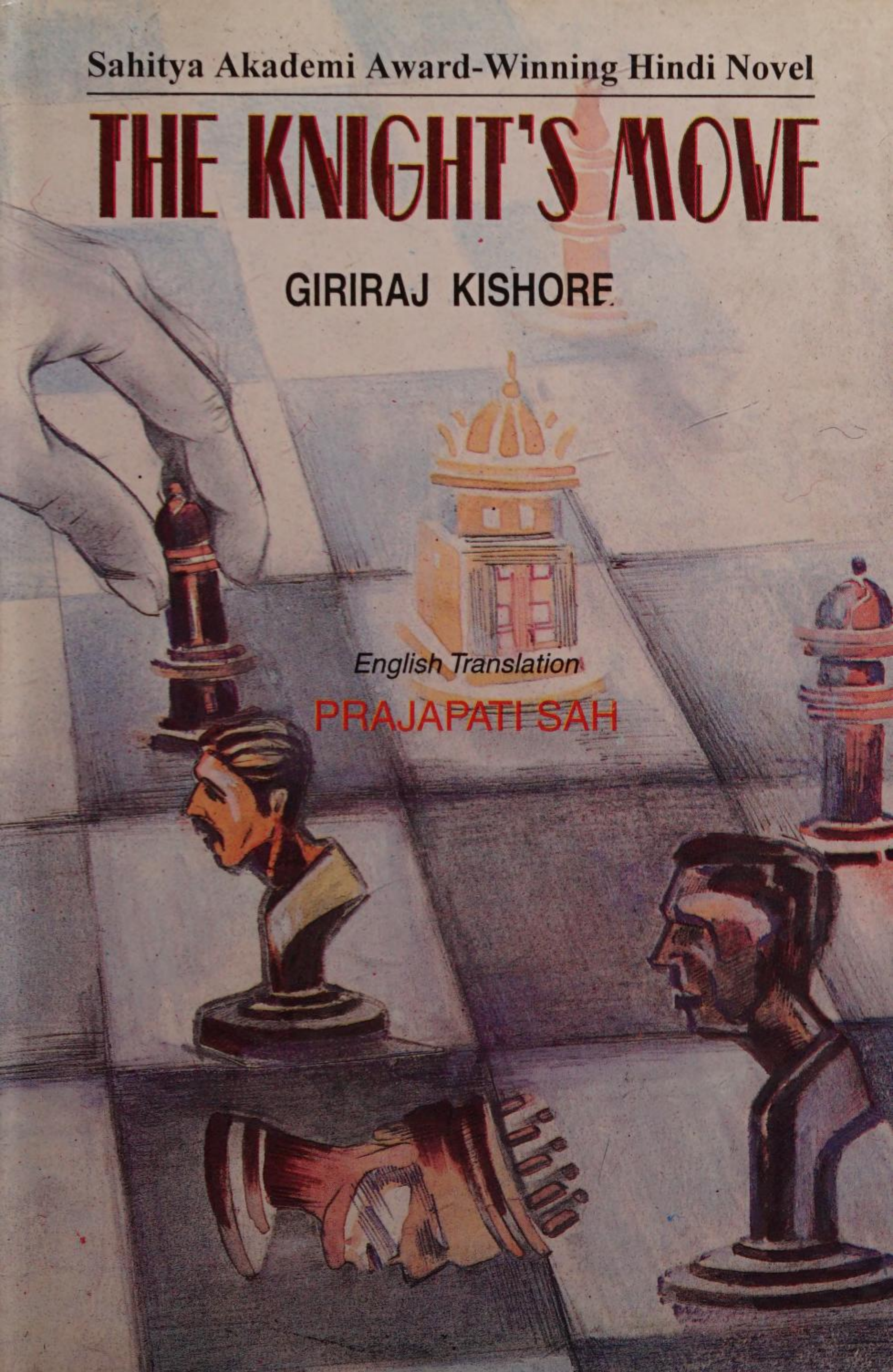
Sahitya Akademi Award-Winning Hindi Novel

THE KNIGHT'S MOVE

GIRIRAJ KISHORE

English Translation

PRAJAPATI SAH



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This novel entitled 'The Knight's Move' is an English translation of *DHAII GHAR*, for which its author, Giriraj Kishore, won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992. Set in the feudal setting of the rural western Uttar Pradesh, the novel straddles a period which has as its pivotal the attainment of political freedom. Kishore's arc light in this novel moves from a period when the feudal order was basking in its pre-twilight glory, with all its internal perversities, its fierce and ruthless oppression of the peasantry, its collusion discomfort at the treachery kept firmly suppressed, from all this to the period immediately before and after Independence when this feudal order saw power slipping away from its grip, the rise of a new political class. The novel ends by placing a big question mark on the values resurrected by this new class. To Raghubar, the symbol of the ever-questing idealistic youth, these values seem no different from the ones that had thrived in the feudal world of pre-independence.

In the midst of this flux and turmoil stands the rock-steady Bade Rai, a tragic figure comparable to some of the tragic heroes of Thomas Hardy. But a stark difference also separates the two: In Hardy's novels it is the hero's character that shapes his destiny; in Kishore's novel it is the hero's perception of his destiny that shapes his character. 'The Knight's Move' is a novel about that destiny, which changes but does not change. As in a game of chess, the destiny is pre-defined: only the pieces that undergo that destiny keep changing.

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THE KNIGHT'S MOVE

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd Century A.D.
Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

Sahitya Akademi award winning Hindi Novel

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GIRIRAJ KISHORE

Translated by

PRAJAPATI SAH

Sahitya Akademi

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WHY THIS NOVEL ?

When Bishen Bhai made the proposal that I should write another novel like *Jugalbandi*, it was not as if I didn't grasp the real intention behind the proposal, but, I don't know why, I took the proposal literally. The question that then started troubling me was 'Have I said everything I wanted to say in *Jugalbandi*. Is there nothing more to be said?' A similar question had arisen when, having written *Log*, I thought of writing *Jugalbandi*, but at that time the question was not so clearly defined. The issue then simply was whether *Jugalbandi* should at all be written after *Log* had already been written, and the answer that *Log* is not *Jugalbandi* had sufficed. *Jugalbandi* had still to be written. As it turned out *Jugalbandi* wasn't *Log*. This time the question pressed itself on my attention with greater force, and in different shades. How long are you going to recycle the same milieu? Have you run out of experiences? Some friends even suggested that in the absence of anything better, I should write a sequel to *Jugalbandi*. I must admit that these questions forced me to re-examine my position. I then came to the conclusion that there were many facets of that milieu which still needed to be exposed for a better understanding of the social setup that was then taking its place. I felt that if I did not expose those facets, they may go unexposed by other writers of my generation. The life which we have known and experienced reveals itself to us at short intervals, a stretch at a time, and throws a challenge to the writer. The writer must face that challenge with an open mind and an open heart. He must unburden himself of his vision, and of his experience as it is revealed to him, or there is no relief from the creative pressures on him. He must share his joys and his sorrows with his readers and make them partners in his journey of exploration. Actually there is nothing else that the writer can offer the readers. Only the readers can share the most private of his secrets. Sometimes they find them acceptable, sometimes plainly unacceptable, and sometimes decades are gone before they can decide whether or not they are acceptable.

6/ The Knight's Move

I have been witness to characters, great and small, who were products of the cultural ambience and the conditions peculiar to that milieu; I have been witness to their complex psyches, their meannesses as well as munificences. A large proportion of that experience is still lying unused in the storehouse of my memory. When this fact about myself became apparent to me, the floodgates of memory opened and everything came rushing back to me. The only option now open to me was to relive those times and to capture them with my pen. A writer does not always write to liberate himself in self-expression; he also writes to betoken the age— be it his own or a bygone one. This has its rewards as well as dangers. The bigger danger he faces in the world of literature is the rejection of his work by the reader. This is a danger which is perpetually present before a writer, and he has to be perpetually prepared to face it. It is upto the readers to endow a work with significance by accepting it— the writer himself can do nothing about it.

One more point. I have always been fascinated by the changing face of relationships that tie man with society, man with man, and man with institutions. Be it a novel, a play, a story or a simple article, I have always tried to highlight these changing relationships. It has been my lifelong desire to sing of the changing faces of these relationships. Whatever changes a society in an age undergoes become the sheet anchor of the new age. And when I say I have 'tried.' I mean precisely that, not that I have necessarily achieved. A writer is a creature of effort. Achievements are made in science, business and politics. Literature follows a long way behind. The road to success in literature is paved with failures. There are of course writers whose constant effort is to convert every one of their efforts into a success. They produce a work and simultaneously start a hardsell campaign which doesn't cease till the effort is hailed as an achievement. Such 'achievements,' however, do not last long. Writing is like a hot oven in which are fired thousands of earthen pots; some come out baked to perfect beauty, others half-baked, and still others chipped and broken. To expect of an empty or a half-fired oven that each of its products will be a work of perfect beauty is to aim at the impossible.

I am also aware that repetition, be it a repetition of the milieu, of the social ambience, of characters, or whatever, is hard for the readers to accept. But if description, reiteration and repetition

contribute to the presentation of an integrated portrait of a society and constitute an aid to its appreciation, the writer must take the risk. If he doesn't, he himself calls into question the responsibility of a writer. He may not be responsible to others but he can't get away from his responsibility to himself. For me a novel or a story is not an entertainment anymore; that may be reason why my writings make certain demands on the readers, and not on the writer only. Demands are not easily accepted, no matter what their nature. As a result, my writings appeal only to a limited readership. In my view, a novel is also a sociological study; the subjects of its study are those human equations which explicate the interpersonal relations that have existed in the past, that exist today and that will exist in the future. In my view, novels and short stories, in fact, even plays, contribute to the development of a scientific, or a semi-scientific, attitude to life, and they ought to do so. From this point of view, Yashpal's writings are highly significant. What we write today will come to the aid of the coming generation in defining their attitude to life. What we are writing may not be epoch-making literature, but it has its value as the fertilizer which prepares the ground for such work. As such, its contribution is not negligible.

This novel spins a tale. One may sometimes get the impression that the order has gone haywire, but that's only an impression. The threads snap here, join up there and the yarn keeps spinning. It's a story with a long trajectory, which totters along the shifiting path of societal relations in transition from one social order to another.

The title of this novel too kept me in tenterhooks for a time. First I called it *'Raghubar Knows All,'* then changed it to *'Horses';* finally settled for *Dhaii Ghar* (The Knight's Move). 'Horses'* and *'The Knight's move'* are anyway closely related.** The chess knight (horse moves up, down, sideways, in short, in all directions.

Giriraj Kishore

Kanpur
18 October

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* Literally 'two and a half houses,' but here refers to the knight's move in chess. The squares on the chessboard are known as 'ghars' or houses.

**In the Indian chess terminology, the knight is called 'ghorā,' or 'horse.'

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Translating *DHAII GHAR* has been a pleasurable, even an exhilarating experience for me.

What makes the task of putting another man's ideas, feelings and experiences in your own words a pleasurable one?

The answer, I fear, can only be one: In the process of translating, you make those ideas, feelings, etc. your own, and, of course, giving expression to one's ideas and feelings in a language in which you feel at home is a pleasurable experience, and at times can also be exhilarating.

But can anyone make the ideas, feelings, attitudes and experiences of another one's own in their totality?

No, clearly not. Not despite a specific and concentrated effort. Nor should one probably try it always, for one does so only at the risk of losing authenticity and plausibility.

So what is the cost one must pay in translation? I am afraid it has to be paid in terms of faithfulness to the original as the word is commonly understood in the context of translation of literary texts. Within certain limits, this cost must be paid by everyone who values authenticity above faithfulness.

In translating *DHAII GHAR*, I have tried hard to keep that cost to the minimum: I may even have paid in terms of authenticity in some places. Giriraj Kishore, the author, to whom I had constant access, and the invisible Akademi reviewer also tried to curb my extravagance. I hope the result is a faithful translation which at the same time rings true.

Nothing gave me, and some of my friends, more anxious moments than the translation of the title. I wished very much to have my own title for the translation, and indeed I did give one to the initial draft, even if somewhat half-heartedly, but the Akademi reviewer confirmed my original judgement. I had a feeling that the Hindi title, *DHAII GHAR*, failed to do full justice to the richness of the novel, picking as it did on its technique of narration rather than on the substance, but when I tried to find a substance-based title myself, I found it difficult to come up with one that could match the 'hard-nosed' quality of the Hindi title (I can find no better word to describe the difference). I hope its literal

English translation THE KNIGHT'S MOVE retains that quality. One can apparently sometimes hit the bull's eye while aiming at a tangent.

No less pleasurable is the task of thanking my helpers and well- wishers. Top of the list is the author himself, Giriraj Kishore, who not only paid me a compliment by inviting me to translate his prize-winning novel, but was also available with whatever help I sought of him. He went through the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb, correcting both my excesses and errors.

I hope the final result justifies the faith he reposed on me on the slender basis of a story of his which I had occasion to translate earlier.

For my friend and colleague, Krishnamoorthy Aithal, to whom I did the double injustice of forcing my manuscript on him and not accepting any of his couple of dozen or so suggestions for the title, I have nothing but sympathy. While translating, and thanking the helpers in translation, may be pleasurable activities, I cannot assume that reading other people's translations too is!

I must therefore also record my thanks to Akademi reviewer, who, while raising the level of my own confidence in this maiden enterprise, did not fail, through his *sthalipulaka nyaya*, to jog my linguistic sensibility awake at those places where it seemed it had gone to sleep. There may still be many grains of rice which aren't quite cooked, but if the meal satisfies the reader on the whole, the time and effort spent in the kitchen, as every housewife knows, will have been worth it.

Finally, a word of thanks must also go to all the others who did not discourage me from undertaking this work. That includes my family. I wonder why they didn't. They had so many reasonsto.

PRAJAPATI SAH

KANPUR

NOTES

1. In the transcription of Hindi words, the symbols ā, ī, and ū stand for the long counterparts of the corresponding short vowels. The symbols ĩ and ã and a stand for the nasalized varieties.
2 There is a section called NOTES AND GLOSSARY at the end which explains the more uncommon Hindi terms used in the novel and also provides short comments on the mythological references.

My name is Bhaskar Rai. I am the last of the Rais of an old and well-to-do Rai family of western Uttar Pradesh. There'll be no more Rais after me. There are, of course, my children, but what made us the Rais that we were was a big zamindari, or fief, that we had. We lost it quite sometime ago. Neither the fief nor its legacy has remained. While I live, I carry on the Rai name since I am part of that fiefdom; a leftover part. My father, Bade Rai (Eldest Rai), whose proper name was Hari Rai, left for his heavenly abode nearly thirty years ago. That was the Dusshera day. We'd rushed through the puja. After the puja we all went to him and Panditji put the red tīkā on his forehead. He died the same moment.

The ammunition had been loaded. It was customary to fire eleven guns on the Dusshera day. But the command never came. The commander had left his post. So the guns were lowered, the ammunition unloaded and returned to the gunnery. That's the only time I remember when puja was held but the guns remained silent. I knew then that the Rai line was finished. Some people are like light itself. As long as it shines, everything thrives and there is life all round. Then it goes out and everything is dead. When Bade Rai died this feeling overcame me. I felt it was time to say farewells for me too. Though I can't say how much longer I'll live, I'm sure it can't be very long. As a matter of fact, the sooner the end comes the better. Why prolong a hapless life? It'd probably still have been worthwhile if I had the will to change it, but that's gone too. I have now neither the resilience necessary for withstanding the shocks of life, nor the spirit to stand up to the challenges of life. I'm now eighty-four. That was his age when Bade Rai took his final leave. I've been granted his years, but the fame and the glory that were his have eluded me. Of course, in his later years they slipped through his fingers too. Like a handful of sand.

These are not the best of times for the Rai family. There are still some of them left, but they hardly count. There is my eldest son, Raghubar, the custodian, you might say, of whatever is left of the Rai name. But he's too far ahead of us. We can't

get anywhere near him and he can't retrace his steps. It's not that he doesn't care. Only recently, when I was laid up in a Delhi hospital with a steel rod in place of my hip bone, he was the one who looked after me. Extremely soliticious and full of attention! But attention is one thing and loyalty another. Where can you find loyalty now? Like stickiness from modern glue, it has disappeared almost totally. I wonder if you've noticed. Modern glue doesn't stick, or sticks very little. Of course, 'gum' sticks, but gum isn't pure glue. As he grew older, Raghubar got more and more disgusted with our ways of life. But never mind. These are not the best of times for the Rai family, as I was saying.

As long as Bade Rai was living, I never thought of God. Now, even in bed, I think of nothing else. When all your bridges start collapsing, you start thinking of God. You expect a bridge to descend from heaven. Whether or not bridges are made in heaven, it then seems to you to be the only place from where, if from anywhere, a bridge may descend. Though I must admit that bridges are very earthly objects. As long as he lived, Bade Rai was my God. I could never think of him as my father— always as my God. I always felt I was born of his piss. Raghubar says that, in the feudal system, he who gives you birth is God; so is he who gives you food. Well, if thy father is thy God, why shouldst thou look for Him elsewhere? But this is probably no longer the case. Thy father is no longer thy God and thy God is no longer thy father.

My schooling had been limited. I could've gone on a bit longer, but, like cactus, which grows on little water, children of high families grow on little schooling. A few do manage to do well in studies but eventually it's like water off duck's back. It was as true in those days. Children of high families did not go far with their studies. Schooling was considered to be the worst form of slavery. In actual fact, it was these children who were languishing in the worst form of slavery. In later years, whenever my children, Sona, Raghubar and Girwar, shirked their studies, and I took them to task for it, I couldn't help being reminded, to my great discomfiture, of my own school-days. Why do I pester my kids, I asked myself, for what in my my own school-days I considered to be a pursuit beneath my status? Bade Rai, of course, was

different : he understood the importance of good schooling. In his own days, he'd studied English, Persian and Urdu upto the tenth standard. He too was constantly admonishing his children. Maybe it was because he was not directly involved in our upbringing that I did not have a more decent education. I now can't help feeling that had I had a little more education, I'd have learnt to worry a little more about myself and about the times to come, and probably I wouldn't be so oppressed with a sense of my own inadequacy today. Actually the fact of my being partly educated, and the exalted status of my father had made me absolutely carefree about my future. I recognise now that one is not carried into one's future borne on one's father's shoulders : one has to walk there on one's own two legs. Raghubar is an example. He decided to walk on his own legs and he made it. Girwar and others relied on me and you can see where they are today : still on the starting line. I worry about them. Who'll took after them after I'm gone? Raghubar, I'm sure, will do his bit, but how far will that take them?

Sometimes it also occurs to me that had I acquired English, as Bade Rai had done, I'd probably have become an honorary Magistrate like him. I'd have heard cases. Bade Rai started as a Magistrate and went on to become Assistant Collector. Clever chaps, these British. Knew how to kill several birds with one stone— and at no cost to themselves. Having Indians as honorary Magistrates meant saving on salaries, using Indians to hand out punishments to Indians, while at the same time making them feel specially privileged. Bade Rai thought no end of his honorary magistracy. Looking back, it was one more chain round the slave's neck. But this is clearly hindsight. Times are no longer the same. At that time, I too could not have imagined a higher honour. If I told you what my real feelings at that time were, you'd probably laugh at me. I used to see myself holding trials like Bade Rai, pronouncing judgements and receiving police salutes. Now that the spell is broken, I feel that the bigger the privilege bestowed on one, the sturdier the chain of slavery round one's neck. The privileges are now all gone, but those chains, since turned into habits, still hold us in bondage.

The truth was that I was scared of the British. Bade Rai

socialised with them. Both my fear of the British and the pride Bade Rai took in his social access to them were demeaning in their own ways. I learnt this from Raghubar. At first I used to think that Raghubar was being impertinent. In my young days one couldn't even imagine the kind of behaviour that Raghubar displayed towards important people. A single snarl from a Britisher could have sent me sprawling into space. Throwaways of the British households were proudly displayed in our living room : chests of drawers, dressing tables, flooring, decorative pieces. Everything except dishes and utensils. Each item had the label of the British officer from whom it had been procured : Judge So-and- So, Collector So-and-So, Commissioner So–and-So. These people had become an inseparable part of our lives through the objects they had left behind with us. The things are still there, but now they lie neglected. The feeling of a shared ownership is gone. God knows whether those co-owners are still living, or dead; for us they are still living. These things didn't come cheap, mind you. In fact, we always had to pay extra for the British label. Call it a bribe if you will, or a thankfully offered price for a friendship that was priceless.

I, Bhaskar Rai, was the eldest of Bade Rai's sons. I had a younger brother, Arun Rai, and a sister, Rani. The sister is no more; the brother still lives. He was twenty years my junior. I don't know why I keep saying 'He was' : still is, as I've just said. Bade Rai was well versed in Persian, English and Urdu. He'd studied upto the Entrance level. He socialised with the British and sported a suit. But he neither drank nor ate meat. Of course he attended the club and played bridge. He absolutely refused to take water or food that had been touched by anyone except a brahmin. That was one reason why he disliked Gandhi. Whenever he attended dinner at the club, or was invited to a rich friend's house, his meal would be prepared separately by a halwāī and served by a pandit. His drinking water was put in a burnished vessel, covered with a towel and placed on a table that stood separately from the others. He never had to worry that these arrangements might not be fully honoured. The Club had workers of all religions— Muslims and Christians included— and of all castes. But a brahmin boy had

been specially hired for him.

There was nothing new about these arrangements in those days. In fact, the Hindus sported this exclusivity as a special badge. The result however was that people of other religions and castes, who intermixed freely, often passed snide remarks : 'No, please don't blame us. We didn't make Hari Rai an untouchable; he's chosen to be one.' There were many others like Bade Rai in whose lives untouchability played a very important role. Actually in mine too. Later when my children grew up and things were no longer the same, I had to change. But there are some castes which still remain untouchable for me. Don't ask me why.

Bade Rai was conscious of the importance of education in life. Hence he did his best to see that I completed my schooling. But how was that possible? After all I was Bade Rai's son! There were two English-medium schools in our town; in those days you barely found one or two in a whole district. I went to one of those two. It was called Edward School. Our servants called it simply the English School. Those who wanted to show off their education called it the Edbed School. I studied Urdu and Persian at home upto the fifth standard. I was admitted to school in the sixth standard. The maulavi who taught me Urdu and Persian at home, however, continued. At school, it was all English. Mine was rather weak, so one Mr. Bhatia was engaged to coach me in English at home. He couldn't have weighed less than two and a half maunds. Maund, seer, and chatāk were the measures of weight used then. A coach used to fetch Mr. Bhatia; the maulavi walked. He was lame, but he walked. He lived closer to our house, though. Even so, there simply was no comparison between an English teacher and a maulavi. The English teacher was a class apart. If the maulavi ever got to ride on the coach, he was filled with childlike glee and would shower a stream of blessings on us. Mr. Bhatia, on the other hand, always got off with a curt 'Thank you'. The 'Thank you' always worked greater magic than the blessings. The coachman would keep on repeating it to himself like a mantra. It's rumoured that during the Mutiny some Kashmiri pandits had succeeded in paralysing the guns trained at their chests with the use of a few

English sentences. They'd been captured by the British while escaping. The moment they gibbered in English, the guns were lowered. How could one fail to be impressed by a language that worked such miracles? It's also rumoured that one of Panditlji's ancestors was among them. Some even go to the extent of saying that if Panditji made sure of a place for English during his prime ministership, it was because of the role it had played in saving the lives of his ancestors. As for me, I was always scared of English, and continue to be scared of it. But I have always considered English to be an extremely valuable language for children. Mr. Bhatia often asked me to form sentences. My use of the singular and the plural was rather haphazard. In our languages, we always use the plural to refer to the elders. I did the same in English. Mr. Bhatia always pulled my ears for this error. One day he slapped me. I glared at him and said : If this happens again you'll regret it.'

Mr. Bhatia didn't come the next day. The coach returned without him. There was a note addressed to Bade Rai which said : 'Due to some personal reasons I won't be able to continue the tuition. I beg to be excused.' The maulavi was of course a different kettle of fish. I'd grabbed hold of his raised hand a few times. Whenever Bade Rai asked him how I was doing in my studies, I'd look daggers at him with my back to my father and he'd splutter: 'Very well. Very well indeed, sir.'

But Mr. Bhatia's note ruined everything. Bade Rai questioned me : 'Why has he stopped coming?'

I kept quiet. Bade Rai shot his second question : 'Were you disrespectful to him?' I shook my head. His coach was ready. He got into it and the coach drove off. Mr. Bhatia's salary was delivered to his house. I was gloating over my release from the burden of English, when, a few days later, Bade Rai called me and made the announcement : 'You're being transferred from the Edward School to the Government School.' I was stunned. I dared not ask, but I was certain that Mr. Bhatia was behind this decision. I was straightway admitted to the Government School. Here the picture was quite different. Strict discipline was the rule. There was one positive feature, though. The school was a great distance from home.

Servants from home could not be sent to school at will. The coach took me to school in the morning and came back for me again at closing time. I occupied the entire seat on the coach like a king. There was was always a tussle among my friends for a ride back with me, and the ones I favoured felt ever so grateful and honoured.

Edward School had been under Bade Rai's thumb. Hence I'd passed the sixth standard without any difficulty, but here I failed the seventh standard. Bade Rai got to know about it only after several days had passed. When he did, he sent for me and asked me to stand facing the wall. I stood in that position for about an hour. I could strike terror in the hearts of others, but before Bade Rai I dared not raise my head. Sweat poured from every pore in my body. My legs were jelly. The throat was parched. Tears streamed from the eyes. We were in Bade Rai's office. That was where he did all his work : writing judgements, managing the affairs of the zamīmdārī, writing letters, and so on. He was not one of those who pulled out their pens anywhere and everywhere. He had a felicitous hand. In those days there were hardly any typists. The whole town boasted of only one. He was called Dayaram Typist. Sometimes Bade Rai sent for him. There were of course plenty of scribes. They wrote all the legal documents : affidavits, wills, applications, and so on. They wrote in Persian. Some of them were so clever that they had the drafts of all the documents by heart. Affidavits and wills were written in yards long rolls of paper. Sometimes preparing a long document took a scribe several months and you could tell the scribe from his smell in the document. The English language scribes were perhaps called copiers. Bade Rai wrote each draft several times. The final draft was a work of art. Large beautifully calligraphed letters, like pearls! But his lines somehow always moved at an angle. For that matter, his neck too was always at an angle; and so was his cap. He tied his turban too at an angle. When he rode the coach and people on either side of the road bowed to him in salute, his already crooked neck acquired a further angle of acknowledgemnt.

So there I was, facing the wall. I wanted to turn around and and see where Bade Rai was, but sheer terror stopped me every

time. After about an hour and a half, Bade Rai looked up and called me to him. I cringed forward on my toes. I'm sure no modern schoolboy fears his father as I did mine. When I was close enough to him, he spoke. 'Times are changing.' he said. 'Do you have any idea what the coming times are going to be like? No, you don't. You only know how to order the servants about, how to loaf around in coaches. . . I'm telling you all this'll soon be a thing of the past. Only those who are well educated will be able to boast of these things. When our ancestors acquired these things, they'd nothing to do with education. Lineage was what mattered. And loyalty. The future is going to be different. That's why I say 'Study!' The road to the future is lighted by education. Forget us and serve your teachers. They are the new masters. We belong to a dying age. A father only brings up the children; it's the teacher who cuts and polishes the diamonds and brings out their shine.'

I was amazed. Bade Rai had always been a man of few words. We'd never heard him use more than three or four at a time. And he'd delivered a speech! Then he fell silent and pored over his work. Thinking back, I wonder how Bade Rai acquired such accurate foresight into the future. I often repeated the same words to Raghubar and Girwar but am very doubtful if they had any effect on them. I regarded my father's words with great awe, but I wouldn't say they had any effect on me either. May be people thought differently then. A very significant part of my life was spent in looking after our landholdings and farming. The rest of it went into devising ways and means of keeping the splendour and majesty of Bade Rai intact. I never did anything else, never even thought of doing anything else. When that phase ended and I found myself on my own, there was nothing but darkness all around. My children too were lost in that darkness. Now I am a cipher, an infant who can't support even himself, nor take any decisions on his own. Time has left me on a highway, like a tramp. There was a time when Time found itself breathless trying to keep pace with me; now, injured by its flying hooves, I lie here, unattended. The blame is entirely mine. I let Time flow, like water in a drain. I realize now how heavy and leaden are the feet of Time; they can crush

you in an instant. Yet, how fleet-footed is Time; it's here one moment and gone the next!

After I failed the seventh standard, I had no wish to go to school. All my classmates had moved on to the next class. Their faces shone with success, but that shine was of a different sort. It didn't quite compare with the shine of prosperity on my face. I had converted my depression into defiance. Inwardly, however, I felt like a crippled horse who'd fallen behind in the race. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch up with the ones who'd raced ahead. I had to go to school. I went with an air of unashamed brazenness, as if I was proud of failure, as if I considered studies a pursuit degrading to my status. Fine if you made it, but also fine if you didn't. Big deal! After all education wasn't our fief! Much time was to pass before I finally realized that there is no greater fief. In those days, of course, nothing seemed greater to me than the *zamīndārī*, the ownership of enormous quantity of land. Those who earned their living by work, or through studies, appeared to us to be an inferior class of people. We were landowners, *Zamīndārs!* Who could hold a candle to us? I must add that I wasn't the only one who thought this way : there were a whole lot of other boys. All of us were unmindful of the changing times. For us, time was changeless. Little did we realize that Time is a castle of shoddy construction : you remove one brick and the whole structure comes tumbling down.

Some of us had formed a gang at school. The gang had its meetings under a mango tree. We all stuck together. Outside the school, our coaches stood ranged in a row. The coachmen, smoking 'Lantern' cigarettes and discussing their masters, waited the school to be over. A packet of Lanterns cost two pice then. There was a class-distinction among the coachmen too. The wealthier the master, the more important the coachman. Some boys didn't have coaches. They were attached differently to those who had. A few didn't care, but the number of such boys was very small. We carried our importance into the classrooms too. We sauntered into the classroom as if it was a public park. In retrospect, the whole thing appears so stupid. One of the teachers made a joke of it. 'Do come

in, sirs.' he'd say as we made our leisurely way into the class, 'But if you don't wish to take the trouble, the class can come to you. Why do you wish to be bothered by studies anyway? It's the poor and the needy who need to bother about them; what use are they for the masters?' We would smile in condescension. Others in the class looked at us wistfully and envied us our good fortune. Looking back, I feel that it was they who were the lucky ones. We invariably wake up to time when it has already passed us, and is disappearing on the horizon like the last carriage of a train. Rare are the people who can see that the time is here while the time is still here.

My only friends at school were boys who were like me, or wanted to be like me. Since Bade Rai outshone all others in prestige, most boys hovered around me. My mother was living then, an extraordinarily simple and self-effacing woman. So simple indeed that she didn't even know counting. We used to have gold and silver coins then. The out-of-pocket allowance I received from the dīwānkhāna was fixed, but I always managed to wangle some money out of mother– by fair means or foul. Mother used to have *athamāsīs* (gold sovereigns), which she gave me to change, and I always shortchanged her : sometimes half, sometimes three-quarters. If I remember correctly, we used to get eighteen kaldārs (silver rupees) to an athamāsī. I always got *kaldārs* as well as *athannīs* (half-rupees) in change and handed mother the mixed lot. She only asked : 'Bhaskar, are you sure you aren't cheating me?'

'What a thing to say!' I'd pretend to be shocked beyond belief. 'Cheating you! Have you ever heard of anyone cheating his mother?' Mother would be overjoyed and shower her blessings on me. As for me, even two rupees would make me feel the richest man on earth. I'd fete my friends and feast myself. In those days we had coins of gold and silver; now we only have paper notes. Most of the money wangled from my mother I squandered on my friends. When mother died, her vision had deteriorated. Arun was still a baby. Rani, my sister, was seven or eight. It was Rani and Bhavani who brought Arun up. Bhavani died recently. He died with his head on my lap. When Bade Rai was close to death he'd called Bhavani and told him : 'Bhavani, there isn't much that I have left

now, but you've served me truly and well. Ask me whatever you wish to have— a house. . .land. . .'

With folded hands and tears in his eyes, Bhavani had said : 'Give everything to Bhaskar Bhaiya, master, and to Raghubar Babu. I must now serve them as I have served you. I have no other wish.'

Bade Rai looked at him and breathed his last.

When Bhavani died, I wasn't even in a position to repeat the words of Bade Rai. It was Bhavani who'd spoken : Bhaskar Bhaiya, I'm letting you down. Do forgive me. I'd promised Bade Rai. . .' and that was all. I saw to it that he received a fitting funeral.

These memories! They keep coming back and breaking the thread of my story.

Bade Rai had a strange whim. It was his wish that whenever his wife, that is my mother, appeared before him she should be wearing a new sari. New, not just washed or clean. A sari that had not been worn before. If he ever caught her wearing a washed sari, he'd roar like a lion and mother slunk away like a goat. In those days that was the sort of oblique expression one gave to one's love.

'Does it behove you to roam around in those rotten old clothes while I'm still living?' he'd demand.

Mother never replied, just shook her head. But her eyes would be full of entreaty as if saying : 'Please, please! Don't say such things.'

Bade Rai carried on : 'Why are you wearing this sari then?'

Mother would still be quiet. He'd then call dīwānjī and order him to get the cloth-merchant over with a selection of saris and other clothing material. There was only one respectable cloth-merchant in the town then. He'd transport almost his entire cloth-store to our haveli. Women used to wear collared shirts with cuffed long sleeves with the sari. Mother spent all her days crying silently. Half her life was spent crying, the other half cooking. No one really liked to see mother cooking. There were four *missars* (brahmin cooks) in the kitchen : one cooked, the other served; one cooked the morning meal, the other the evening meal. But

unexpected guests dropped in at odd times and then mother had to cook. It was unthinkable that a guest should retire hungry to bed— no matter if it was midnight or two in the morning. It often so happened that mother got a full meal ready only to discover that the guest had already dined. It was considered improper to ask the guests if they'd like to eat. Bade Rai had issued standing instructions that meals should be served whether or not the guests ate. In any case, wood was the only fuel available then. Blowing at the firewood to light the fire and getting smoked all the time, mother lost her vision very early, but she never so much as uttered a word of complaint. If ever anyone brought up the matter before her, she'd only say : 'I'm the mistress of this house; if I don't cook for the guests,. who will? So what if I lose my eyes, or even my life?'

When mother died, two things weighed on her mind. The first of course was Arun; the second, my marriage. She wanted to see me married, but I wasn't the age. Bade Rai was firmly opposed to the idea of child-marriage— something he'd learnt from the British. The *Sarda Act* was for him the word of God. 'As an honorary magistrate, if I don't respect the law, who will?' he said. And mother, her cravings sealed in her bosom, died a martyr to this belief. My grandmother was still alive then. She also shared mother's wish. Three or four months later, she also passed away. She too tried her best to persuade Bade Rai, but he was immovable. Finally, the inevitable happened and in quick succession both mother and grandmother traipsed off to heaven.

The two had a strange equation— grandma and Bade Rai. Bade Rai had two younger brothers : Krishna Rai and Raghav Rai. Grandma doted on the youngest— Raghav. Next in her affections came Krishna. With Bade Rai her relationship was almost formal, though none except her could call him by his first name, When Bade Rai went into the family quarters of the haveli for his meals, he prostrated himself at her feet. She always stayed with him, though of course, at that time, all the brothers stayed together, But in her thoughts she was always with her younger sons. Her dealings

too were confined to them. When she died, her last rites were performed by Bade Rai. I don't remember now if he cried then, but I remember that his luxuriant moustache had disappeared overnight and his head was clean-shaven. Wearing a white vest and a dhoti, he walked in the cortege, behind the bier which carried his mother's body, like an ordinary mortal. No one had probably ever seen him like this before. The face was scorched and lustreless. A crowd of people followed him, but he appeared to be alone. When the body was placed on the pyre and it was to be lit, he placed his head at her feet the way he did every day before his meals and said : 'You leave me unprotected, Mother. Whom shall I look to now to protect me from the excesses of this world?' Maybe he cried then. That day, for the first time, I felt a kinship with him. When my mother died, I performed the last rites. Draped in a dhoti, I went round the pyre in a *parikrama*. My head was clean-shaven. My beautiful curly hair, which I fancied a lot, was gone. And I was sore about it.

When I grew into an adult, I acquired a friend. His name was Kishen Bhai. He was several years my senior. He was in love with my curly locks. Whenever I called on him, his face lighted up. I felt rather awkward. It was only later that I got to know what was what. He used to caress my hair, which bothered me a lot at first. His spacious and airy first-floor room, the chaubārā, became like a haven for me. I ceased to be bothered by his queer habits. Whenever I felt tense and stressful, I went over to him. I knew he loved me; in fact, that he was my lover in some sense. He was always ready to give up everything for me. Though an ordinary and average man, he had come into a legacy, and now owned a fief. The *nouveaux riche* are known to be either stingy in the extreme or to treat money like dirt. Kishen Babu treated it like dirt. He didn't *spend* money, he blew it up the way cattle blow up dirt with their hindlegs. Often, with no regard to his age, I pulled him up for his squandermania, but he'd take it like a lover's grouse. Often he caressed my limbs and entreated me to sleep with him. As time passed, I got used to these things.

Everyday I set out to go to school but it was a rare day when

I arrived there. I played marbles, I flew kites, or, if I ran into Kishen Bhai, I just had a good time. The moment he saw me, Kishen Babu would give up whatever he was doing and would devote all his attentions to me. This behaviour of his had given me a bad name. The room where he entertained me was daintily decorated. A constant fragrance of ittar filled the place. He'd order all sorts of delicacies for me as if I didn't get enough to eat at home. Often I left everything untouched. That'd make him miserable. For some strange reason, I loved to see him in misery. It made me happy. At times, he got so crazy that he tried to feed me with his own hands. Sometimes I accepted it, sometimes I thrust his hand aside. Once when he forced food into my mouth, I spat the gob out into the dish. He promptly swallowed it. That day I felt terribly sickened, and left the place in a huff. Kishen Bhai begged me to stay, but I remained firm.

I picked myself up and went to school. Had I known what was to happen at school that day I certainly wouldn't have taken the trouble. There was a boy in my class— Janakiram. He was the son of a leading pandit of the town, who lived very close to Kishen Bhai's place. Janakiram was not one of our gang, but we were friendly and often shared jokes. He called me Rai and I called him Pandit. I'd touch his feet and he'd give me his blessings, and then both of us had a hearty laugh. His forehead was always plastered with a big, broad *tīkā*. Dark and tall, he also sported a hefty top-knot. I don't know what came over him that day that the moment he saw me he blurted out : 'Why're you hellbent on dragging the Rai name through mud? If you must spend all your time at Kishen Bhai's, why don't you move in with him?'

I never took such remarks from anyone. No way! No one could insult me thus and get away with it. I looked around. An expectant crowd of boys was waiting for my response. Their faces indicated very clearly that they expected a swift and fitting response : something that had never happened before. 'He considers himself a big Rai. Let's see what he does,' they seemed to be thinking. It was for me a momentous decision to make : a decision that could raise my name in the eyes of my classmates or sink it forever. If

I let myself fall in their estimation, then I had no right to call myself a Rai. It was customary in those days to carry a knife. Along with a cap, a handkerchief and shoes, a knife was considered a symbol of status and prosperity. Shoes were very rare then. Boys from rich homes wore Dawson shoes.

My knife was a large one with an ivory handle. In those days *rājis* (Roger's) was the commonest knife : it had a strong blade and a firm handle. I took the knife out, unfolded the blade and tested it on my fingers like a professional. Blood was in my eyes. I could see only the knife, and Janakiram. Then my hand flew, like a falcon. He raced but I was upon him like lightning. He was down at a single stroke. Blood spurted from the wound. The sight of blood brought me to my senses. What had I done? The hard, bulging, bloodshot eyes of Bade Rai seemed to peer at me from everywhere. Hundreds of hands seemed to extend towards me as I stood there in the middle, the blood-spattered knife in my hands. I stood transfixed at the spot for what seemed to be an eternity, as if waiting for the astrologers to decide the auspicious moment when it would be wise for me to move myself. All the boys standing around me seemed to me to be spattered with blood : the trees, the school buildings— everything was covered with blood. When I moved, I moved with measured steps. I did not make a dash for it.

That day the coach had returned from Kishen Babu's place as I had no intention of going to school. The school held no importance for me. Hence one of the boys hustled me into his coach and told me to remove myself from the scene as fast as I could. I got off at Kishen Bhai's place. For the first time that day I felt that here was the only place to which I could return after committing a crime, and still feel welcome. The knife was still with me. Most of the blood had rubbed off onto my clothes; some had dried up. Dried up blood is as dirty and dull as fresh blood is crimson and pulsating. I saw this for the first time that day. took out the knife and put it before Kishen Bhai. The sight of a blood-stained knife startled him : 'What's this? What happened?' he wanted to know. I tried to control myself but the tears gave

me away. They upset him too : 'Why do you cry? Come on, tell me what's happened. You know I can't bear to see you crying.'

'Ramdin Maharaj's son brought up your name to throw insults at me. I knifed him.'

Sweat broke out on Kishen Bhai's forehead. His eyes bulged. Suddenly, paralysis had struck him. He swallowed a few times. The knife lay before us. We both stared at it as if it would spring to life again the moment we let it out of sight. One portion of it, where the blood had brushed off, shone brilliantly; the other, with dried blood on it, was dull and colourless.

Kishen Bhai had been struck dumb. His tongue seemed to have stiffened permanently in his mouth. It appeared he'd never be able to speak again.

I broke the silence : 'Seems I must go elsewhere. You aren't going to stir yourself.'

Finally, and with a great effort, he emerged from his paralytic state. Patting me on the back, he said : 'What's done is done. The point we must consider now is that you're Bade Rai's son. What do you say to that?'

The bloodshot eyes of Bade Rai had constantly been haunting me since the moment the knife had struck its victim. When Kishen Bhai mentioned him again, those eyes seemed to peer at me from everywhere— like the two eyes in V. Shantaram's famous film *Do Aankhen Bārah Hāth*. I had seen that film a few years before, and had been unable to cast those eyes out of my mind. There was no forgiveness in Bade Rai's eyes : there was fierce anger, and contempt. I tried to pull myself together and said : 'Do something if you can. Don't drag Bade Rai into it. From all your tall tales of love in bed I'd begun to think I meant something to you. But never mind, I'm going.'

He tried to catch hold of my hand but I shook him off. Suddenly he was overflowing with concern.

'Where'll you go?' he asked.

'None of your business.' I said.

He had recovered by now. 'No.' he said 'You're not going anywhere. Stay here. I'm going to Bade Rai. I know he won't like

it. It'll be the first time for me too, but no one can help you now except him.'

I tried to stop him, but he was unstoppable.

'Don't be stupid,' he said. 'You think you can keep an incident like this from your father? Who's there who can do anything to save you now— except him? I can shelter you for a few days, but I can't save you.'

Kishen Babu had an old and faithful servant. Leaving me in his charge, he went off to see Bade Rai. Till that time Bade Rai had no inkling of my visits to Kishen Babu. Although an immigrant in the city, Kishen Babu had managed to earn comprehensive disrepute for his special proclivities, in particular for his fondness for boys. I dreaded that Bade Rai may start taking him to task, or, returning with him, start thrashing me. Like a cockroach in swelling and frothing water, I found myself gasping for breath in the depths of his fiery-hot eyes. Sitting alone in the room, I could feel Janakiram's blood seeping in under where I sat. I kept shifting from one seat to another. All those boys seemed to have collected around me once again and were swimming closer to me every moment in the current of blood. I felt myself trying to run, and was breathless with the effort.

Kishen Bhai had taken the knife with him, but I felt I saw it there lying on the ground, growing in size every minute. Any moment it could slaughter me. Any moment the police could walk in. I had no idea at all of the consequences that could follow, but I had the consolation that I was Bade Rai's son. Even so, I often started out of my reverie. If the consequences of one's acts are unclear to one, one perhaps doesn't worry at all. But if one has partial knowledge of the consequences, one suffers. That was what was happening to me. On top of that, there was Bade Rai and his famous temper.

Every few minutes, Kishen Babu's servant would look in and, in the manner of his master, start imploring me to eat something.

Nearly three hours had gone by when Kishen Babu returned, his face no longer as tense as it was when he'd left. Another thing

was that he'd returned alone.

Apparently, when Kishen Babu arrived at the Rai mansion, Bade Rai had just finished his *puja*. It must have been about noon. It was his custom to retire to his room after *puja* and spend a few minutes in meditation. When Kishen Babu arrived, that's where he was. Bhavani, who received Kishen Babu, tried to use this excuse to send him back. But Kishen Babu insisted that the matter was extremely urgent as Bhaskar Babu was in trouble. That disturbed Bhavani. He went and reported to Bade Rai that Kishen Sahai wanted to see him.

'Kishen Sahai? Which Kishen Sahai?'

'Kishen Sahai of Patora, heir to Madam Vidya Devi's property.'

'What on earth is he doing here?' Bade Rai flared up. Bhavani knew of my regular visits to Kishen Sahai's place, but he feigned ignorance. He only added that the business was urgent and Kishen Sahai wanted to see him at once.

When Bade Rai came out of his *puja* he was always in his wooden sandals and draped in the yellow ritual cloth. In this state, he never let anyone come near him, or touch him. So he came out of the room. Kishen Babu moved forward to touch his feet but be stepped back, raising his hand.

'Yes?' he asked.

Kishen Babu had already lost nerve. Bade Rai's flinching motion had seen to that.

'Do sit down.' Bade Rai said.

'How can I. . . with you standing?'

'No, you must sit down. I've just come out of *puja*. . . I must change. Do sit down.'

Bade Rai's was a commanding voice which could make you sit down whether or not you wanted to. Kishen Babu sat down, but got up again instantly.

'I have something urgent to tell you.'

'What about?'

Kishen Babu sank under his voice, so overpowering it was. He tried hard to lift himself up and managed to say :

'About Bhaskar Rai.'

'About Bhaskar Rai? What's he got to do with you?' Bade Rai stared at him in angry surprise.

'I know him. I also know he's your son.'

'Many people know that. What else do you know?'

Kishen Babu didn't reply to that question. Instead he went straight to the point.

'At school Bhaskar picked up a quarrel with Pandit Ramdin's son.'

'A quarrel?' His voice was steady, but it was clear that the opening gambit was over.

'What happened?'

Once again, Kishen Babu skipped the question and drove to the main point.

'Bhaskar stabbed him. . . with a knife.' He took out the partly-wiped, partly-stained knife and placed it before him. Bade Rai fixed it with his gaze for a minute. Bhavani, who stood nearby, muttered : 'It's his all right.'

Bhavani was then a mere boy, a year or two older than me.

Bade Rai glared at him. He pissed in his pants and fled the spot at once. Actually he was more of a companion to me than a servant. We often played marbles and flew kites together.

'He's struck this knife at my prestige,' Bade Rai said and after a brief pause, turned to Kishen Sahai.

'But how did you get to know of it, you who. . .' He wanted to say something nasty about Kishen Sahai but stopped himself.

Kishen Babu now rejoined with confidence :

'Bade Rai, it might be better if you thought of Bhaskar for the present. Only you can save him now. The police might be here any moment looking for him.'

Bade Rai's face looked as if someone had flung water on a flaming lump of coal.

'Where's he?' he asked.

'At my house.'

Bade Rai's face flushed fiery red, but the very next moment the rush of blood subsided.

'Keep him there, Let him out only when I send word.

Character, dignity,. . . this boy seems to have lost everything.'

Bade Rai walked away, his trailing voice shaking tremulously in the void. Like a wounded bird, thought Kishen Babu.

Diffidently, Bhavani came forward again and asked Kishen Babu : 'What happenend to Bhaskar Bhaiya?'

'Nothing.'

'Whom did he attack?'

'Mind your own business.'

'Whenever he goes to your place, it's I who take him there in the coach.'

Kishen Babu looked closely at him. The look of sadness and childlike innocence appealed to him.

'Why don't you ever come inside?'

Suddenly a voice boomed from inside the house :

'You may go now. Await my message at home.'

Kishen Babu wanted to stay and be a witness to Bade Rai's reactions, but this injunction left no scope for that.

As Kishen Babu left, Bhavani suggested that he might go with him too, but Kishen Babu gave him a smile and said : 'Some other time.'

Kishen Babu was happy that he'd been able to see Bade Rai, and that Bade Rai had immediately taken charge. He'd been mortally afraid that Bade Rai might refuse to see him and have him thrown out of the house. He had, of course, tried to humiliate him, but Kishen Babu had successfully blunted that effort by telling him to think of Bhaskar first.

As he narrated these incidents, Kishen Babu was becoming more and more relaxed and was gradually easing into his usual amorous prattle. I was still tense and all his talk of laying down his life for me wasn't pleasing me one bit. At the same time the thought that but for Kishen Babu's *chaubārā* I'd have had nowhere to go sobered me, and I felt compelled to swallow all the syrupy talk he was ladling out. Sometimes when he looked like overstepping the limits, I had to pull him up a little bit : 'Have some sense. Is this the occasion?'

'Everything'll turn out fine.' he laughed, displaying his teeth.

'You have nothing to worry about as long as I live. We'll sort out everything. And if we can't, I'll take your place in jail. Everything I have is yours. All I wish is for you to keep smiling. . .' and once again, as was usual with him when he started to be intimate, it seemed he would stop at nothing. I had to put up with all this in spite of my intense disinclination of the moment.

After Kishen Babu had left, Bade Rai's anxiety mounted. He was alone at the time. Both the brothers were out in the *zamindārī* on work. Immediately a runner was despatched to fetch both Majhhale Rai (Middle Rai) and Chhote Rai (Youngest Rai) from wherever they could be found. They were to be told to leave everything and come home at once. After despatching the runner, Bade Rai got ready and went to the Police Captain's residence. Pandit Ramdin and his people were already there. When Bade Rai's coach entered the compound of the Captain's bungalow, gestures and whispers began to circulate : 'He's here. . . he's here.' A few quietly slipped out. 'Now that Hari Rai's in the field, it'll be difficult. It should've been done before he appeared.' The moment Bade Rai stepped off his coach he saw Pandit Ramdin. At once he bowed and touched his feet :

'Pāilāgo, Panditji.'

Pandit Ramdin raised his hand and blessed Bade Rai.

The Police Captain was an Englishman— P.Wood. Bade Rai walked into the Round Room. Officers' bungalows in those days had a Round Room where guests who wanted to see the officer had to wait.

Mr. Wood saw Bade Rai as soon as he entered the room. He addressed himself to Bade Rai immediately :

'Well, well, Rai Sahib. What brings you here today?'

Bade Rai paused for a while, then spoke :

'I'm in trouble. I need your help.'

'What happened?'

'A piece of bad luck. What else can I say?'

'Oh, yes, it's always bad luck that brings people here,' he laughed.

Bade Rai told him the full story without concealing anything. Mr. Wood pondered for a while, then said :

'Your son. . . your son. . . Is the victim dead?'

'No, perhaps not.'

'What about the evidence?'

'It might well be given caste-colour.'

'That's too bad. But how can you say that?'

'The people who are standing outside— they all belong to the same caste and the same community. Pandit Ramdin seems to have rounded them up.'

'Please sit down. I'll talk to them.'

Then he suddenly turned around and asked :

Where's your son?'

'Hasn't returned yet.'

'I'll send some policemen.'

'That won't be necessary. I've got my men out. They're looking for him. They'll find him.' Bade Rai looked at the Captain. The Captain smiled and walked out.

'O.K., O.K,' he said.

Hari Rai fidgeted. His mind was in a tumult. Was he right in telling this Englishmen everything? Won't he take advantage of it? At the same time, misleading the authorities isn't right either. If Mr. Wood found out later that Hari Rai had lied to him, what would he think? 'Never tired of protesting his loyalty and then comes and feeds me lies!' At least he'd escaped that infamy. But if he turns against me, what'll happen to Bhaskar? Why did he want to send the police after him? Possible the other party has already bribed him! He too had made the necessary arrangements— what must be done must be done. But how did it all happen? What could possible have provoked Bhaskar to pull out a knife? That too against Ramdin's son! I've always given Pandit Ramdin the highest respect; then why did he make a beeline for the police? Why didn't he come to me first? If he'd come to me I'd have got Bhaskar to apologize to him. And what's Kishen Sahai doing in all this? A loose character, if ever there was one! A man of thorough disrepute! Has he acquired a hold on Bhaskar? Ramdin lives in

the same neighbourhood : Is it possible that they fell out over some shady business? When Madam Vidya was still living I've had occasion to visit her. What a fearless woman! Managed the whole estate by herself and never gave a dime for what people talked about her! Constantly kept the wolves at bay! People are always waiting to swipe everything from a laid-out table, but she never so much as let anyone cast an eye on her property. The slightest hint and she'd ride personally to the man's door. How often had she implored him to take over the estate : 'You were his greatest friend!' she'd said, ' Please take over the reins of this fief! I have no greater well-wisher than you.' She even wanted to adopt Bhaskar. Of course, being the eldest son, he couldn't have been given away. But the lady died and now we have this Kishen Sahai in her seat! Bhaskar is certainly in his grip. But why? What can Bhaskar possibly want from him? He knows this entire zamindari goes to him after me. So why does he go to him?

Bade Rai closed his eyes.

Mrs. Wood knew Bade Rai very well. Now she suddenly entered the Round Room and, seeing that he was sitting alone, said :

'You're sitting here alone, Mr. Rai? Where's Philip?'

Calling people with half the name is customary with these people.

Bade Rai got up to greet her and pointed towards the front of the house to indicate that Philip was out there.

Mrs. Wood scrutinized him closely and said :

'You look troubled Mr. Rai. Anything I can do to help?'

It was as if someone had thrown a line to a drowning man. Tears rose to his eyes but he was conscious that he couldn't afford to be emotional in the presence of a woman. He controlled himself and said :

'I'm in trouble, Mrs. Wood. My minor son got into a scrap with a classmate of his and wounded him.'

'Wounded him? How?'

Bade Rai let out a long sigh. 'With a knife.' he said.

'Terrible!' Mrs. Wood's eyes popped out, startling Bade Rai.

'How brutal. . .!'

Suddenly the Rai in Bade Rai stirred. He almost snapped :

'Don't children in your country sometimes get into scraps? Or is everyone born a Jesus?'

Mrs. Wood looked at him. Bade Rai's face was quite normal despite the sharp rejoinder he'd issued. 'Oh, they all do.' she said. 'but they don't pull out knives. They fight duels.'

'Kids are kids. Immature. My son too must have acted on impulse. The only difference is that he happened to have a knife on him.'

'A knife is more painful,' commented Mrs. Wood.

A retort was on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it. After a brief pause, he said :

'I'm worried about the fate of my son.

'Anything I can do to help, Mr. Rai?'

'Yes, please help and save him.'

Bade Rai took out a small velvet pouch and left it on the table. Mrs Wood glanced at it, then looked away. Bade Rai got up. 'I'll go and see Mr. Wood.' he said and left the room.

Mrs. Wood tiptoed to the velvet pouch, picked it up and weighed it in her hands. Then she loosened its string, peeped inside and took it with her to the other room as though absent – mindedly.

When Bade Rai returned, the room was unoccupied. His eyes travelled to the table. The pouch was gone. A touch of relief appeared on his face. In the adjoining room Mrs. Wood was talking animatedly to someone, perhaps Mr. Wood.

Mr. Wood entered the room a little later. Bade Rai got up.

'Mr. Rai, the brahmins are adamant. They are insisting on his arrest. They say they'll take the matter to court. It's better if you talk to them and arrive at a compromise.'

Mrs. Wood dashed into the room.

'It's stupid. Kids are kids. What sort of an SP are you? Want to turn these little kids into professional criminals?' She was breathless.

'No, darling! I want to help him.' He turned to Bade Rai.

'Please go and see the Collector, Mr. Dick. I'll talk to him too. If possible, put in a word with the Commissioner too.'

'I'll talk to Dick.' butted in Mrs. Wood. 'A storm in a teacup! The boy is absolutely fine, isn't he?'

'How big was the knife?' Mr. Wood suddenly asked.

Bade Rai took out the knife and put it on the table.

'And I thought it was a dagger! This is a kitchen knife! How can anyone kill with it?'

Mr. Wood laughed and spoke to Bade Rai.

'Keep him in hiding for sometime. Don't let anyone know where he is. This knife too. We'll have to see how the other boy progresses. He shouldn't get worse. I'll do whatever I can. Now you can go and relax.'

Bade Rai got up and left. His assurance wasn't complete yet.

The entire brahmin class was ganging up. So much so that our own family priests were siding with them. The whole town was baying for my blood. Majhhale Rai and Chhote Rai had returned by evening. As I have mentioned before, their names were Krishna Rai and Raghav Rai respectively. There was a fourth brother, Gajpat Rai, who had died young. Bade Rai had got Krishna Rai nominated as a Tehsildar, but he'd picked up a fight with his officer and resigned. At least that was how he put it. One picks up a fight with one's officer only in two cases : either in one's single- minded pursuit of greed one throws caution to the winds, or one's self-respect wins out in a battle with the necessity of earning one's bread and butter. With Majhhale Rai, the former was more the case than the latter. In fact, there never was any question of a conflict between self-respect and bread and butter : there was simply too much bread and butter. As for self-respect, it was more of pride than self-respect. This perhaps was the weakest spot of feudalism in those times. Feudalism today is much more flexiible.

The pride, in its turn, was both suicidal and murderous. It was used as a weapon of feudalism. As for self-respect, the less said the better. One who didn't have to work with his hands and splurged on inheritance had pride; one who worked to feed himself had self-respect. But, if he so wanted, he could feed others too. And if the going got hot, he could claim self-respect and refuse

to budge. Actually there wasn't even a tuppence worth of self-respect. Chhote Rai (Raghav Rai) sometimes seemed to get a whiff of self-respect but couldn't actually locate it. My younger brother, Arun Rai, brought up by Bhavani and my sister Rani after mother had died in his infancy, was a favourite of Chhote Rai and his wife. Krishna Rai being childless, I was the eldest son in the whole family, which included all the three brothers. When they got to know of the accident, Krishna and Raghav Rai were very much upset. Raghav in fact started crying : 'We're ruined. Our prestige in ruined. The spotless name of the Rais has been tarnished.' Krishna Rai was more of a realist. 'No need to worry at all,' he said, 'He's a Rai. No one can touch him.'

On arrival, the first thing that Krishna Rai asked Bade Rai was : 'Have you seen Mr. Dick yet?'

'Yes, both Dick and Wood are sympathetic. The problem is all the brahmins are flocking together and stepping up pressure on the district authorities.'

'Where's Bhaskar?'

'Bhaskar. . .' Bade Rai paused a little, then added : 'He's at Kishen Sahai's, the one who's appropriated Madam Vidya Devi's property.'

'But he's known to be an evil man,' said Chhote Rai.

'True, but Bhaskar has somehow landed there. For the present I feel he's better off there. Pandit Ramdin will try his best to get the police to search this place— just to spite and humiliate us. Dick has approved of the arrangement.'

'We could try to split the brahmin camp, if you agree.' Majhhale Rai suggested in a Machiavellian tone.

'It'll be tough. They think they've found a way of teaching the zamindars a lesson. Since they are priests, they consider everyone their flock.'

'Look, Bade Bhaiya, if you want this matter suppressed, you have no other way except to split the brahmins. We must do everything to weaken their case, since withdraw it they will not.'

'Do as you think fit, but don't forget that pandits have always had a place of honour in this household. It is this boy who has

sown the seeds of discord.'

'They don't think the way you do.' said Majhhale Rai, almost to himself.

Thereafter Krishna Rai let himself loose into the brahmin camp with great abandon. It was a strong camp. Krishna Rai also tried to activate the zamindar camp into boycotting the pandits, but this camp wasn't so strong : the zamindars were afraid of the evil curse of the pandits. Even so, Majhhale Rai secured a reasonable degree of success. Three of the witnesses broke ranks and testified that they weren't present when the actual accident took place. Pandit Ramdin stated that the eldest son of Bade Rai had knifed his son. The doctor's report claimed that the wound could only have been caused by a simple object, maybe a blunt knife or a strip of iron. By no stretch of imagination could it have posed any threat to the life of the victim, nor in fact could it have been used with the intention of killing him. Janakiram also couldn't say much that could have damaged me. The police report was already in my favour. The judicial bench had been specially constituted for this case, and also came out in our favour. The opposite camp moved heaven and earth but drew a blank. I was eventually acquitted with honour.

The case had provided Kishen Babu with a good excuse to start making regular visits to our haveli. This made me happy. Kishen Babu was, of course, mightily pleased. In his heart of hearts, Bade Rai, however, was distinctly unhappy. I could never understand why he grieved over such a small matter. I had seen him remain stolidly unmoved over matters of much greater consequence. I have childhood memories of cane lengths left to soak in water. When fully soaked, they were transferred to oil. Whenever there were tenant farmers who dilly-dallied in paying up their dues, Ganesh (Gannu Jamadar) and Badlu Chamar would take out the oil-tensed canes and whip them hard. The canes cut their skin and blood flowed. Often their relatives had to carry them home on cots. If any of the tenant farmers had the temerity to answer back, all hell would break loose. A few more daring farmers would have

their mouths forcibly opened and pissed into by Ganesh and Badlu. This was known as 'slaking the thirst.' All the while Bade Rai would carry on with his work in an attitude of total unconcern. The only thing he was careful about was that no one should succumb to the beating.

I'll never forget one incident. Kedar Syani's daughter was to be married. Majhhale Rai was riding horseback into the fief for *kan*. When the crop had been harvested and the grain collected, there followed the *kan*, or estimation of the grain. The estimation could be either by weighing on a balance or just a guestimate. Then followed the apportionment, or splitting of shares. Anyhow, there was going to be this wedding. The groom's party belonged to another village which lay outside our fief. No one in the groom's party knew Majhhale Rai by face. When Majhhale Rai passed that way, the groom and the others of his party remained seated on the cots. The groom's cot was covered with a thin rug and a sheet. At first Majhhale Rai just rode by, but then he realised that, far from hailing him according to the prevailing custom, no one had even shown him the courtesy of standing up. He turned the horse around and ordered two or three of the villagers present there to give five blows with a shoe to each member of the party and to make the groom do some frog leaps. The villagers just stood there with their heads bowed.

Majhhale Rai couldn't stand disobedience. He warned the villagers : 'Don't you want to stay in the village? 'But the villagers did not move. The place where Majhhale Rai was camping was a little distance away. He sent for some men from the camp. Each one of the party was then given a shoe beating. The men who'd dared to disobey him had a staff shoved up their rectums after being stripped. By now Kedar had been informed. He came posthaste and fell at Majhhale Rai's feet : 'Please, master, don't do this to me, please! It's my daughter's wedding. Let it pass off peacefully. She's like your cattle. And these are my guests, my honour. My prestige's now in your hands. . . in your shoes. Please don't ruin my daughter's life.'

All Kedar's words made no impression on Krishna Rai, nor

did anyone expect them to. Kedar dragged his bridal daughter before him and pushed her at his feet. 'Master, she's your vassal. Do what you please— kill her, cut her into pieces. . .'

Majhhale Rai took out an athamāsī and threw it at her as if she was an unclaimed corpse, and addressed himself to Kedar :

'I'm not displeased either with you or with your daughter, but I must teach these bastards a lesson. They must learn how to conduct themselves in the presence of a zamindar. A zamindar is a zamindar, no matter which district he belongs to. These fellows seem to think they are adding to the prestige of their district by denying me respect.' He spurred his horse and galloped off.

Kedar's daughter sprang like a tigress and hurled the athamāsī at the receding back of Majhhale Rai with all her might. It did not hit him as he was already out of range. She screamed : 'Take this athamāsī with you and place it on the dead body of your child. . . I curse you. You'll die pining to see the face of a child.'

Her body was found floating in the canal the next day. Kedar lost his mind.

Against this background, I was quite unable to understand what the hullabaloo was all about if I'd brushed Ramdin's son with a knife. Why were they blowing it up like this? Was it because Janakiram was Pandit Ramdin's son and Pandit Ramdin considered himself to be the highest-born? But, wealth and prestige wise, weren't we on the top? In fact, didn't they accept alms from us? In any case, when we engage in a brawl, aren't we all equal? This was the conceit I'd received in legacy.

Inwardly, however, I was all keyed up with tension.

Finally, I was withdrawn from the school. For some days I remained idle. The mornings began with an oil massage. Then an elaborate bath, followed by grooming and preening, scenting and perfuming. Then I presented myself at the *dīwānkhāna*. Bade Rai had issued standing instructions that I was to attend the dīwānkhāna at least for two hours everyday, and try to understand the work of the zamindari and sharpen my wits a bit. I was, however, to attend the *dīwānkhāna* even if wits were not very much in evidence.

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The tenants started presenting themselves fairly early in the morning. One of them would have managed to collect, after a great struggle, a rupee or two against the demand for five. We'd fling the two coins, transported with such nervous care by the poor farmar as if their very touch would pollute us. The coins spun like tops, then gradually lost their swirl and collapsed as if exhausted. The farmer would bend to pick them up, and as he did so our flunkey gave him two flying kicks. That sent him sprawling on the ground on all fours like a dog. A trickle of blood appeared at the mouth. Sometimes the teeth caved in. Some farmers were brought, hand and feet tied, dangling from a stave carried by two menials. That was called *dandā dolī*. They would be scared stiff like the villagers in folk stories who had to be served for a monster's lunch. Even as they were being belaboured, they'd fall on diwānjī's feet, plead helplessness, beg for mercy, cry and blubber. One had his crop ruined by too much rain; in another area it had fallen a victim to drought; someone had lost a bullock and its mate was in a black mood; someone else's back had been broken by his daughter's marriage; another one had a thread ceremony; still another one had lost his father and had to shell out the last penny on his funeral rites. No matter what the reason one pleaded, one was not spared. And though they knew, they still came. The bigger tenants brought offerings of milk and sugarcane juice, or gur, sugar, fruit and flowers. They were then allowed to sit next to dīwānjī. As long as they had this privilege, they sat totally unmindful of the whippings and the thrashings that went on around them all the time, as if they were simply not present at the scene, or were quite unfamiliar with the goings-on.

Sometimes the big tenant would find himself confronting the scene simply too directly, but it would still make no difference to him. The difficulty for him would arise when *diwānjī* sought his support for his excesses. Then the big tenant would call the victim by his first name and give him some friendly advice : 'Why don't you pay up on time, Kalua? You know you have to give the master his due, and with due respect too! After all what can poor *dīwānjī* do? He's mercy incarnate, but he too is bound to the wheel of destiny.'

'Radho Bhai, you know as well as anyone the kind of rains we had this year. Even the cattle had to go without fodder because it had all turned into soup. It was as if Gangaji herself was racing through our fields and barns. Not a single grain of crop we had! Where do I get the money to pay the master?'

When the beating started, Radho Bhai would look away and try to hide his face. When everyone else had been disposed of, with folded hands, Radho Bhai would approach *dīwānji* : 'It's quite true, *dīwānjī*, the crop has been totally ruined.'

'But you're here to pay your rent. How come your crop wasn't ruined?'

His face would now be saying 'No, I,m not here to pay,' while, hands folded, he'd plead on : 'You know, *dīwānjī*, I'm always among the first ones to pay, but this time there simply was no way. I've tried everywhere but no one's willing to lend a rupee. How can anyone? If there's a rich crop standing in the field, the lender has some assurance that, sooner or later, the loan will be settled, but if there's nothing to pledge, why should anyone lend? You are the *māi bāp*, the saviour. Please save me!'

Suddenly, *dīwānji's* attitude would be completely transformed. His neck would now be held at an angle. The offerings accepted a little while ago would now be completely forgotten.

'Look here, Radho! Don't try to inveigle me with words. I let you sit by my side and you start showing airs!'

Now he would fall at *dīwānji's* feet : 'Have a thought for my position, dīwānjī! How can I face my own children if I lose my position, my prestige? I am the master in my house and the father to my children only so long as I have this position. The day I lose it, to hell with the master and to hell with the father! Like a pickle gone bad, I'll be fit only for the gutter.

Dīwānjī would now call Ganeshi : 'Ganeshi, this Radho here is unhinged. Can you put him back on his hinges?'

Now Radho would be bristling with fear. Drops of sweat would be glistening at hair-ends like oil. He'd take out a few kaldārs from his inside pocket and hold them in his fist. When Ganeshi arrived with the implements of torture, *dīwānjīi* would add :

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'Looks thirsty! Must have left home without a drink. Go and slake his thirst well. No, not here. Chhote Rai is in his room. Take him to the other compound. Call Badlu too : he can massage the body. Radho Babu is no small farmer; his excuses aren't small either.'

Now Radho would fall flat on *dīwānjī's* feet : 'Spare me, please spare me! Take this. I promise I'll pay the rest next month.'

'See! you need an oil-press to extract oil. No pressure, no oil! In any case, the bigger the client, the smaller the hole. Go and make it bigger. Get the hole-enlarger!'

'Please! Please! Don't do this to me! Don't inflict living death on me! Don't drag my fair name through mud! Please, master!'

'Fair name? You earn fair name by doing fair deeds. Pay your creditors on time! What fair name can you earn if you don't square accounts with your creditors?'

At this point *dīwānjī's* eyes would fall on the gifts brought by the farmer and he'd pull back a little.

'You have one week's time. I needn't tell you what the eighth day will hold for you!' He would peer closely at Radho and Radho would melt away.

At one sign from *dīwānjīi*, the other two would also disappear like two jinns of the lamp.

I used to enjoy it greatly but also found it odd. Maybe, I thought, this is the only way to run a fief. As long as this circus continued, Bade Rai would be confined to the *puja* room. He never saw it with his own eyes and could not be reached for appeal. By the time the puja was over, *dīwānjīi* too would be through with his ritual. I'd know that the *puja* was over as soon as a call went out for Bhavani to bring on the *bhog* (food offerings to God). The bells would start ringing, which meant Bade Rai was performing *ārtī*. The *bhog* would then become his breakfast. Milk, shelled almonds, dried grapes, black pepper balls and a parāthā fried in pure ghee, After offering these items to God, he would eat them himself. Then he'd get dressed and start his business at the court. The first to be presented were cases from the zamindari. Someone's wife had

set up house with another man; someone else had forced another man out of his land, or cut his water-channel, or defaulted on debt-repayment, and so on. When these cases had been decided, the official cases would be presented. Bade Rai had a special permission to hold trials at home. He'd continue till about two or two-thirty.

He had his afternoon meal in the kitchen. Before he sat down for his meal, he'd always inquire if all visitors and guests had been attended to. He'd eat only after he was satisfied on this point. The women of the house had their meals only after he had finished. This practice lasted till the very end. He insisted on his late meal hour even when he was ill, and refused to change even on medical advice. Before he died he called me one day and told me why. 'Everyone of you wanted me to have my midday meal early. I never agreed. Do you know why? If I were to have my meal early, then the kitchen fires would have to be lighted again in case there were any late visitors, or we'd have to get the meals from the shops. Now getting meals from the shops is disgraceful for a household, and having to relight the kitchen fires is resented by the womenfolk. A meal served cheerlessly is neither good for the one who eats, nor does it earn any virtue for the one who serves it. It only serves to fill the belly.' This was the first time I had heard of this. I also wanted to keep up this tradition but found it impossible to do so. But never mind.

Whenever Majhhale Rai and Chhote Rai were at home, they too would eat in the kitchen draped in a single piece of cloth as demanded by the religious routine. Three thālīs would be ranged in a row for the three brothers. As the three brothers mounted the steps in their wooden sandals, the clatter of their feet emphasised deeply the profound silence that generally reigned in the large haveli. I too had my midday meals with them for a few days, but the regimen was too strong and I soon reverted to my early lunches.

I must have attended the *dīwānkhāna* for only a few days when responsibilities also started coming my way. When performing these duties, I had a feeling that I was joining the Rai order. The feeling filled me with sheer delight. The bicycle had just been

introduced then in India, and I was given a British bicycle. I immediately stopped using the horse and the coach and took to the bicycle. Riding a bicycle gave me the feeling of riding a deer-drawn chariot. One of our ancestors had one made. It was drawn by two deer. Those deer had also been trained by Kāle, our sāīs (horse-steward). He had also designed the chariot. It had room only for two riders. When one of the deer died, the chariot had to be junked. The other deer was despatched to the Lucknow zoo. It took me only a few days to grasp the fact that the bicycle was a mechanical conveyance requiring the services of neither a beast nor a sāīs. People considered it to be a great achievement of alchemy. Every technical piece of work was then called alchemy. The invention of the bicycle had greatly enhanced the prestige of the British. People simply couldn't figure out how its parts could've been made.

I used the bicycle for touring the *zamindari* too. Since the roads were not paved, I used to be bathed in dust by the time I returned in the evening. Often I fell off the bicycle. When people saw me coming on the bicycle, they'd clear the road for me and would watch the swift-moving wheels with fascination. My feet moved with the pedals as if they were part of the bicycle too. When I parked the bicycle, they came near and touched it to see if there was a goblin in the machine which actually ran it. That it was the force applied by the rider and not some internal force which ran it was a rather late discovery. Another thing about the bike caused a lot of amazement and that was : How does it turn on its own? Does it have eyes? This amazement was due to the fact that nobody actually ever looked at the handle, or the movement of the rider's hands, when the bicycle was moving. I know that today when the bicycle is like an old woman who can be seen warming herself in the sun in every street and at every corner, people will find it hard to believe me when I say that the old woman was one day a young and beautiful girl.

I am now eighty-four. I believe I've said this earlier too. I am a failure and am like a stone that has rolled down a hilltop and now lies purposelessly in the middle of the road. Every passerby

considers it an obstruction and tries to kick it out of the way, though sometimes in the process it finds itself moved more towards the centre of the road. In my time, I enjoyed every kind of conveyance, but when conditions worsened, I was left only with a bicycle. I had then reason to be profusely thankful to this miraculous product, although, in its time, it had made me bite the dust on many an occasion. People then thought that it was the goblin that did it. The bicycle was taking its revenge— it had to, since revenge was almost a law of nature. The same was believed about the train. Whenever a new track was laid, people thought that a calamity would follow. All the evil spirits of the other cities would travel to our town on the train. The British, they said, were doing it on purpose so that they could escape the evil influence of these spirits. The chugging train they regarded as the incarnation of the Goddess Kālī of Calcutta and offered obeisance to it. When the train came into sight, a big cry went up : 'Jai Kālī Kalkutte Wālī', (Hail the Goddess Kālī of Calcutta). The first railway track was laid between Thane and Bombay in 1853. That was the beginning of the technological enslavement of the country by the British. The whole country was excited, although at first a train journey was considered a profanity. While considering it a profanity, however, the people also considered the train an incarnation of the goddess Kālī. It was absolutely forbidden to have even a sip of water on the train. People would travel for days on a train without so much as touching food or water. Since Bade Rai socialised with the British, Majhhale Rai had been a Tehsildar, and Chhote Rai had been bitten by the bug of reformism, our household did not suffer from such blind beliefs about the train or other means of locomotion. Only Bade Rai had some reservations, so he'd get the train compartment, first or second, washed, cleaned and sanctified by a priest before travelling. His food and water travelled with him. The food was 'high' food *(pakkā khānā)*. In his lighter moments. Bade Rai used to say that the British had designed the four classes on the train (First, Second, Inter and Third) keeping in mind the Hindu varnāshrama system (the system consisting of four castes of people and four stages of life). Higher officers and

big landowners travelled first, smaller land-owners and officials travelled second, the reasonably well-to-do inter, and the rest third. It was part of train-travel etiquette to inquire of the person sitting next to you what caste he was. If he turned out to be low-caste, every effort was made to get him to move; failing this, one would move oneself. The result was that people had now started to conceal their castes. It was a common practice to take a bath at the end of a train journey much as one takes a bath after attending a cremation. Trains stopped at bigger stations for an hour or two in the mornings, afternoons and evenings so that people could have baths and eat their meals. Pūrīs fried in pure ghee were the common food but rotīs were also available. They were, however, made and sold by Muslim bakers.

I was talking of the bicycle when this saga of trains started. Actually, Kishen Babu used to say that the best travel is train travel, the best curry is potato curry and the best epidemic is a plague epidemic. The plague was endemic than. It took only a few hours for the death chant to start afresh from a house. I could also have talked about cars, but what good would that be? The sum and substance of what I wanted to say was that I looked after my work in the fief with the help of my bicycle. I know that some people will raise the question : If I was the first one to own the bicycle, how did I ever learn to ride it? And thereby hangs a tale. The first one to see this object called a bicycle was Kishen Babu. He'd gone to Lucknow to see Home Sahib, that is the Home Secretary, in connection with his newly acquired property. There he saw the English sahibs and their wives pleasure-riding bicycles and shopping in Hazaratganj. When he came back he told me abut it. I told Chhote Rai. Though Chhote Rai was an uncle, he wasn't really an uncle-uncle but an uncle-friend. I could speak to him freely about things which I was too scared to bring up before Bade Rai. Once Bade Rai had to go to Lucknow n some connection to see the Lātsahib (the state Governor). When he was leaving, Chhote Rai told him to get a bicycle for me. Bade Rai didn't say a word, but when he returned from Lucknow he was accompanied by a man from the bicycle company with a bicycle. That bicycle wasn't

a sleek beauty like modern bicycles. It was rather long and unwieldy, with outsized wheels. The company man stayed with us for a whole week to teach me to ride. I also arranged Bhavani to be taught to ride on the sly. He was the second man in the town to learn it, though he wasn't a bit proud of it. Very soon, of course, many more bicycles made their appearance in the town. The sons of the rich got them almost at once and others followed suit soon. In three or four years the first bicycle agency opened in the town. It was called 'Babulal & Sons.' And soon, like tea, the bicycle too became a household thing everywhere.

Bade Rai however disapproved of the bicycle. 'Neither a chariot, nor a coach— what sort of a carriage is this?' he'd say. He considered it a vehicle fit for those who were neither men nor women, i.e. eunuchs. Being a respectable man, he could of course never bring that gross word to his lips, and always stopped short of it. He was very particular that I should not use the bicycle in the evenings for pleasure rides.

That was exactly what he said that day too. Some of us wanted to go to the Company Bāg for a joy-ride. Two or three bicycles had been procured. Bade Rai got wind of it and immediately sent word that I should take the gig. A gig too is a horse-drawn vehicle with space for two to sit in the front, while the sāīs stands on the footboard in the rear. The sāīs has to drive the gig while keeping his balance. In those days, rich men of leisure, when they fancied a drive, would order the gig to be readied and would take the driver's place holding the reins. That day, three of us, myself, Kishen Babu and Baso, went to Company Bāg. Baso was a childhood friend of mine. He prospered a lot in later life, and there were several occasions when I had to go to him for loans. We zamindars used two criteria to judge people : if the man was wealthy, we asked : 'Can we turn him to some use on a rainy day?' and if he happened to be poor, we asked : 'Can we turn him into a bonded slave?' Anyway, all the three of us squeezed ourselves into the front seat. Since all the three were slightly built, this was not difficult. Kale balanced himself on the footboard and took the reins. He could

ride any kind of horse and drive any kind of carriage from the tonga to the chaukarā. Actually he was Bade Rai's private coachman and the Chief Vizier of the stables, not minister-Vizier but steward-Vizier. That day he happened to be free, so we grabbed hold of him. As for Kishen Babu, Bade Rai viewed him differently since the incident, though Kishen Babu still viewed me in the same light. I was now grown up and the downy growth was firming up into a harder crop. Sometimes I shook him off, at other times wriggled out with some excuses. He, of course, thought I was being coquettish.

Kale drove the gig on the way there. He did once remark that the shaft of the gig was striking the horse's legs, but, showering endearments and caressing, Kale coaxed the horse to keep up a trot. I wanted him to trot a bit faster even if he didn't exactly gallop, but Kale kept up an even pace. No sooner did we reach Company Bāg , he unhitched the horse to let him cool off and slapped smart his limbs. As he freshened, the horse whinnied. It was a Waler. Walers are tall and long-limbed horses. Ours was chestnut colour, but we called him Safed (White). It had a snaky ring on its mane. Since the snake faced in the opposite direction, it was certain that the horse could never harm its rider. A Waler is anyway known to expect a response from the rider, or sāīs, to each of the messages it sends him : if it doesn't get it, it starts sidling. That was why Kale always kept patting and cheering him on even when he stumbled or whinnied. Bade Rai was an expert in the identification of rings and other hair patterns on a horse's body. People came from far and wide to get their horses identified and treated by him. The hour before his bath every morning was reserved for this purpose.

When we returned after our stroll, Kale was applying spirit to the bruises on the horse's knees. I told Kale that I would be driving the gig on the way back. Kale tried to convince me that the horse was temperamental and bristled up rather quickly, and that he had had to use every trick in the book to get him to pull the gig after he had flatly refused to be drafted. If, God forbid, he received any injury from the gig and bridled up again, it would

be difficult, very difficult, to control him, even for Kale. But, of course, how could a mere sāīs go against the wishes of the son of a big zamindar? I refused to listen to him, and he finally had to submit to a royal will and hand over the reins. The horse at first kept up its balanced pace. Then Baso decided to speak : 'Don't these Rai horses get anything to eat? I'd heard the Rai horses piss fire, but this one is no better than a donkey.'

'Let him take it easy. . .' said Kishen Babu, trying to hold me back.

But the horse, it seemed, had heard Baso. He raised his pace and then kept raising it. Soon it was tearing like a high wind. Kale was shouting from the rear : 'Watch out! Watch out! The horse's gone crazy!' I tried to turn the horse around, but near the toll-barrier it turned towards the Collector's bungalow. Bade Rai was a regular visitor to this place : what's more, he'd bought the horse from an English Collector some years ago when it was still a colt. The Collector's wife was coming out of the bungalow in her coach for the evening ride. Our gig hit the coach and it toppled over. The Collector's wife was thrown off and injured. Since the gig had not overturned, we quickly scrambled to our feet, turned the gig around and fled as fast as we could. We couldn't see the horse in the dark, but he seemed to be in a rage. His hooves were beating the ground as if he was trying to crack it open. The reins were in the hands of Kale again. At first the horse had reared up, but when Kale let him know with a swift tug on the reins that he was back in the driver's seat, he resumed his trot. But it was a faster trot this time as if he was seized of the delicacy of the situation. We were all in a panic. It was quite clear that we had hit the Collector's coach. The screams and cries that came out of it had also been clearly those of an English woman. She had also uttered something in English.

When we made it to the haveli, we thanked our stars. But the fear was not yet over. The mounted police could have been pursuing us, could arrive any moment and arrest all of us. That of course did not happen. None of us had the guts to go and report the incident to Bade Rai. Finally, it was decided that Kale sāīs

himself would go and inform Bade Rai and tell him everything as it had happened, since only Bade Rai could now save us. The news that our gig had collided with the Collector's wife's carriage hit Bade Rai like a bombshell. What a terrible thing had these boys done! No other course of action being quite obvious to him, he yanked the whip out of Kale's hands and lashed out at him with it. Kale took it in stony silence. What was his fault, I wondered. If anyone was to blame, it was me. Kale could've said so, but didn't open his mouth. If he'd said that I'd taken the reins forcibly out of his hands, his punishment might have been greater. But when the lashing was over, he broke down and sobbed like a child. I couldn't sleep a wink that night. The moment I closed my eyes, I'd see Kale standing before me. I'd see him being whipped for something he'd not done. I'd hear him calling out to me : 'Bhaiya, save me!' I'd see the tears streaming down his cheeks, and I'd hear my own deafening silence. And I'd see that Baso and Kishen Babu had made good their escape.

Bade Rai was not getting anywhere with his questioning.

'Who was driving?' he asked.

I kept quiet, though I knew the answer. Having seen what had befallen Kale, there was no choice except to play dumb.

'Who was in the gig?' He fired another question.

'Kishen Babu, Baso and myself.' I swallowed hard.

'So you were the one driving!' He had figured it out on his own. 'Didn't Kale stop you?' he continued.

I was dumb again. How could I deny it? He resumed :

'You want to be the death of me some day? Do you know what the Collector will do if his wife has been injured? He'll have each one of us, the rich folk, parade before him in the sun, and he'll demand to know whose carriage it was. If you can't hold the reins of a horse, how in heaven's name are you going to hold the reins of a fief? And if he gets to know it's my offspring who has done him this honour, I'll of course have to face whatever music he chooses to play, he'll have you whipped hanging upside down.' He paused for a while, then added : 'Anything is possible.'

Then Kishen Babu was called and he too got a tongue-lashing.

'But you're a mature man. You too went along with these youngsters?'

Kishen Babu did some quick thinking and responded at once.

'It was my fault entirely. I let my tongue slip and said to Bhaskar : 'If you don't learn to control the reins of a horse, how are you ever going to control a big fief like yours? When to pull hard, when to ease up, when and where to let alone— you learn these things only when you learn to ride a horse.' But, of course, I had no idea the horse would go off the deep end.'

Bade Rai fell silent. He'd discovered a new Kishen Babu.

It was Kishen Babu who spoke now.

'You must find a way. . . you have to.'

Bade Rai hummed his agreement : 'H'mmm.'

When, dressed for a visit, Bade Rai came out again, Kale sāīs already had the coach ready and was standing at attention. Since he was dressed in khaki breeches, a short jacket and a turban, it was obvious that the object of the visit was some officer. Booted feet and leather-padded calves completed him formal outfit. His eyes, however, still looked wet; possibly they've had no time to dry; possibly the lashing still hurt. When I saw him outside, I reached him first.

'I'm sorry, Kale Kaka, it was my fault. You can take me to task however you wish.'

'Don't feel bad. The master brings us up, he also sometimes pulls us up. Bade Rai is our father, the father of the whole clan.'

'Why are your eyes wet, then?'

We looked at each other in the light of the coach lantern. His eyes were of course always downcast; now I'd to lower mine too. He spoke :

'The ground gets wet. We put some sand on it and it dries up. But when the eyes start flowing, they're hard to dry. Maybe some day, on their own, they'll dry up, if they do.'

What made him say that, I wondered. Was it some private sorrow?

52/ The Knight's Move

Bade Rai emerged from the house and walked to the coach. His shadow scurried after him. Ready to get into the coach, his foot came off the footboard and he walked to Kale. He put his hand on Kale's shoulder and patted it a few times. To me he seemed to be asking, wordlessly, his forgiveness. People like him sometimes allow themselves to be dominated by their egos so completely that truth has no chance of raising its head. Of course, outwardly all the signals are up and flying so that they are understood without being required to open their mouths. Kale fell at his feet :

'No, master, no, I'm not even worth the dust under your shoes.'

Bade Rai climbed into the coach and Kale got into the coachbox. He had to wipe his eyes repeatedly with his turban since he found everything going hazy every few minutes.

Bade Rai asked me to accompany him. I sat facing Bade Rai. Bissu, a chauharī (a short pig-tailed staff) in hand, balanced himself on the footboard. Bissu used to be a charkatā (grasscutter) and had lately been promoted to a footman. From two rupees a month, he now received three. Kale received the highest salary— seven rupees. Salaries were distributed twice a year, at harvest time. The low-ranking staff received their salaries every three months. In addition, jaggery, firewood, coarse grain, etc. were also given to them. Kale also got wheat. On special occasions, weddings and the like, additional grain and wood etc. would also be available. The sāīses had some additional sources of income. Coaches were in great demand during the wedding season and the groom's party would tip the sāīses fifteen-twenty rupees, a dress or a turban, and provisions for five meals. A lower-ranking sāīs would get ten rupees and provisions for two meals. During the wedding season, they could earn enough for the whole year. The sweetmeats and kachaurīs they collected would be eaten for months after they'd been dried. Since they were prepared in pure ghee, they rarely went bad. Often these people would save their entire salaries and would spend them only when they went home to their villages, or when there was a wedding in the family.

Standing in the rear, Bissu wielded his chauharī to keep the mosquitoes away. The sāīs had another one which he used to keep

the flies from bothering the horse. The coach was making good progress. I sat silently, watching Bade Rai. He was tense and ill at ease. Sometimes his eyebrows shot up, sometimes the forehead crumpled. I was scared stiff. God alone knew what awaited us. It was pitch dark. Every now and then Kale pulled the bell-string with his feet, and the sound of the bell seemed to run a crack in the darkness. That made the darkness on either side deeper. Nights had always seemed mysterious to me. I wondered what went on under the cover of darkness. Houses and havelis, palaces and mansions, travellers and wayfarers, shoppers and shopkeepers— everything and everyone is bound up in darkness and is a slave to it. No one is free. The night and its darkness reign supreme over everything and everyone— except over those who, carrying their own lights with them, strive to set themselves apart from the others.

The coach kept going inexorably, as if we were the only ones who had to move. Everyone else seemed stuck to their locations. This is a strange feeling : everyone is stationary and you are moving. Bade Rai, of course, wasn't there at all; he was somewhere else : not there where he sat. Considered thus, we two were in two very different worlds. I was enveloped in fear. I didn't know what I was going to say in case I was questioned. Was it possible that Bade Rai might want to please the Sahibs and change his tune? Then who'd be my saviour? As this thought occurred to me, both my feet, though planted firmly on the ground, began to shake like jelly. Bade Rai sat motionless. Not a finger moved. The roads had no electric lighting then, something unimaginable today. Kerosene lamps burnt on lamp-posts. But their light was like a pebble thrown into the sea. It formed a few ripples, but how many ripples could it form? When the lamps started smoking it was a nuisance. The lampshades would be black with soot, as if the light had been choked. It could sometimes find a hole to peep through, but only a hole. Sharp as a needle point. Generally, though, where there's soot there's no light. Even if there's light. When we were outside city limits, it was of course one long and lifeless tunnel of darkness.

Where the coach passed, the sound of the horse's hoof scattered the silent darkness a little, but it formed again till the

next footfall. Sometimes I felt that it was light which splintered the dark silence, sometimes that it was the sound. Quite a few times I felt that the darkness was stretched like a highway on which rang the regular footfalls of the horse. When the coach neared the Collector's bungalow, I felt the moment had arrived when I'd be alone on one side and everyone else, including Bade Rai, would be ranged on the other side. I tried to view my own position. What I saw was an insect crawling in the mud of darkness. The horse, like a mighty dragon spewing fire through its nostrils, tore through the darkness, rushing inexorably headlong into the Collector's bungalow. Kale and Bissu had dissolved into the scene : only Bade Rai remained, his eyes seeking to penetrate the darkness but getting dowsed by it again and again. That, I thought, was the difference between Man and Nature.

The coach entered the compound. I was getting the jitters again : the fear of being left to fend for myself. For a moment I felt I was going to soil my clothes. Thankfully, it passed. When the coach stopped, Bade Rai emerged from the shell into which he'd retreated. As I got up to go with him, he beckoned me to stay. I liked the gesture. It relieved me, and I breathed again. And so did my stomach.

Bade Rai walked into the verandah of the bungalow. Wearing the red seal of authority, the jamādār offered a salute. Bade Rai took out some silver coins and pressed them into his hands. He held them so tight that not a sound escaped his fist.

'Where's the sahib?'

He pointed to the room and then said in a whisper :

'Mem Sahib's coach hit someone's carriage. Mem Sahib fell out. She's hurt. The doctor is attending her. The SP (Superintendent of Police) has been called.'

'How serious is the injury?'

'Not much. But who can tell about the injuries of the big and the mighty?'

'Do you think someone did it intentionally?'

'The horse was out of control. The sāīs was shouting, 'Watch

out! Watch out!' The moment the coach came on to the street, the horse hit it. It was just as well the coach overturned, otherwise it could've been serious.'

Bade Rai couldn't understand how a gig could've overturned a coach— a two-wheeler against a four-wheeler— yet the fact was that the coach had overturned.

'Whose carriage was it?'

'Couldn't tell in the dark. Must've been one of the rich folk.'

Bade Rai felt relieved. Then asked :

'Who was the sāīs?'

'Rahmatullah, sir.'

This added to his relief. He thought for a while, then said :

'Give my salām to the Sahib.'

'Sahib is with Mem Sahib right now. The senior doctor is with them. It might be difficult.'

'Now that I know, how can I go back without seeing Mrs. Dick? Do let him know if you can.' Then he added after a pause : 'And send Rahmatullah to me. Maybe he can tell me more. How did she get the injury, I wonder.'

The *jamādar* went in. Rahmatullah was coming from the direction of the stables. The moment he saw Bade Rai, he bowed in salute. Rahmatullah knew each one of the horses in Bade Rai's stable. The two looked at each other. Then he spoke in a whisper.

'Barely escaped a calamity today, didn't we, sir?'

'I know. Did you. . .?'

'I've eaten your salt, sir. They may cut out my tongue, but it'll never utter a word to hurt the Rais.'

'The police. . .

'No one saw what happened except me. . . and no one here knows Safed.'

Bade Rai took out some rupees and wanted to give them to him but he folded his hands and said :

'Huzūr, it was from you I learnt to value good faith over money. I'll be thankful to God if I can learn to keep faith.'

Bade Rai looked at him closely.

He saluted again and urged : 'Allow me, master. I must go

now.' And he walked away.

Bade Rai paced the verandah. Rahmatullah was teasing his soul. He'd made him feel small. Bade Rai had come here to admit his mistake and to apologize, but Rahmatuallah had created a dilemma. What a thing is this— faith! Everyone uses it the way it suits him. I'm trying to keep faith by asking for forgiveness for my son; Rahmatullah is trying to keep faith by covering up my son's mistake! I want to admit the mistake because I can't face the annoyance of my masters; he wants to cover up the mistake because he's ready to face his master's annoyance!

When the Jamādār returned, Bade Rai didn't notice him at all. He said :

'Sahib sends his salām and says if it's not very urgent would you mind coming tomorrow morning? The doctor's with them now.

Bade Rai felt slighted. So, in their eyes. he counts for less than a doctor! On second thoughts, maybe it was for reasons of privacy. He couldn't imagine Dick Sahib saying this to him. Nor Mrs. Dick. She in fact respected him a good deal. Whenever there was a disagreement between the two, Bade Rai was always appointed the arbiter. Nevertheless, Bade Rai thought it best to leave. Maybe, he thought, that is how He wishes things to be; maybe He too thinks the way Rahmatullah does.

He walked out without a word.

Partially covered by the coach, Rahmatullah and Kale stood engrossed in conversation. Rahmatullah was the first to see Bade Rai. He bowed in salute again. A Muslim is never found lacking in courtesy to the masters. If he sees the masters ten times a day ten salāms it is. He came closer and said :

'It was absolutely unnecessary, huzūr, for you to take this trouble. Rahmatullah will shed his last drop of blood for you, for the salt he's eaten. Please keep Safed out of harness for some time; specially, don't harness him on the gig. He's a gem of a horse. If he takes it to heart, he'll be lost. A horse always avoids the carriage that has caused him hurt. If you harness him again on the same carriage, he becomes mulish. Like a man, you know, huzūr. Will

never work against his will.'

He paused for a while, then continued :

'If possible, send Safed into the zamindari sir. It'll be a change for him and, of course, there'll be no danger of anyone recognising him either. There isn't another horse in the whole town like him—So tall! So strong! If Mem Sahib ever happens to set eyes on him, who knows she might at once know it was him.'

He was speaking in a very low voice. I sat still in the coach. The fear of the white sahibs had me in its tight grip. Sitting stiffly, I had begun to feel my neck and back ache. Sometimes I had the feeling that Mr. Dick and his wife had their feet planted on my head and on my back and were increasing the pressure every minute. Bade Rai hadn't spoken in response to Rahmatullah; maybe he had simply nodded, I didn't know. Bade Rai took his seat in the coach. Now another fear gripped me. Bade Rai was going to turn to me! He was going to lecture me on how to behave with the whites, how to speak in their presence, and so on! But Bade Rai didn't utter a word.

Rahmatullah came forward and saluted again. Then he raised both his hands in blessing to me and said :

'Bhaiya is a strapping youth now! I remember teaching him to ride. He used to be on the horse while I ran after him. What great days they were! May God give him a long life!'

To me his talk of my youth sounded as if he was using the present incident to throw sarcasm at me. I examined my hands and feet : they were quite fair-sized now. Veins stood out. At the mention of a 'a strapping youth' some other parts of my body had started tingling too. Bade Rai asked Kale to drive. As the coach started moving, Rahmatullah offered his last salute. In a voice raised just sufficiently for Rahmatullah to hear, Bade Rai said :

'I won't ever forget the loyalty you've shown, Rahmatullah.'

As the coach was coming out onto the road, we ran into the SP, Mr. Wood, who was entering the bungalow. The sentry stopped our coach. The Police Captain drew up his horse along side our coach. Behind him one could make out two more horses with two

police inspectors astride them. One of the inspectors moved his horse forward and inquired : 'Whose coach?'

Bade Rai got down.

'Good evening, Mr. Wood.'

'Good evening. What brought you here today?'

'I thought I would have a bridge session with Mrs. Dick, but looks like she fell out of the coach and has received injuries. The Civil Surgeon is looking for them, but apparently can't find them.'

Mr. Wood laughed. 'So your bridge is disturbed. . . The city is getting unruly.' The last sentence was said in a serious tone.

Bade Rai did not comment and, bidding goodnight, returned to the coach. I got only a glimpse of Mr. Wood. Even in the dark his white face glowed like an orb.

The two— Majhhale Rai and Chhote Rai— were worlds apart in everything, though only two years separated them. They'd also studied together at Meerut College. There were only two big colleges in western Uttar Pradesh then. One was perhaps Agra College at Agra, the other Meerut College at Meerut. The St. John's at Agra is also one of the older colleges, but all the boys in our Commissionary went to Meerut for studies. Meerut College was an Intermediate level college then; even so, it was a big college. Both of them lived in the college hostel. A cook and a servitor stayed with them. Also a tonga with a horse and a sāīs. The sāīs doubled as the tonga driver and also arranged for the horse's fodder. A stable-type stall had been rented close to the hostel at two rupees a month. The two brothers used one of the hostel rooms to sleep in, the other as kitchen. There were students from rich families who lived in rented bungalows, had three or four servants and all the other trappings of a luxurious living : a bedroom, a dining room, a guest room, a sitting room, and of course carriages. How much they were able to study in the midst of these luxuries is rather hard to say. Of the two, Majhhale Rai was more conscious of his status and selected his company accordingly. Chhote Rai was more relaxed and took things as they came. He mixed freely with everyone and was a universal team-mate, be it the British teachers

or fellow students. Majhhale Rai always took him to task for this casualness of approach. 'You fraternize with anyone and everyone. Do you know what a bad name that gives to the Rai family? A man is known by the company he keeps. You keep low company and you are taken to be low yourself.'

Both brothers had got married when they were in the tenth standard, but they had no children. Majhhale Rai's heart was never in college and he was mostly to be found at home. A week at a stretch away from home was too much for him. His wife, Majhhali Chachi, was one of the most beautiful women of her times. Chhoti Chachi was beautiful too, and was no less loved by Chhote Rai, but he came home only during vacations. At other times, the most he did was to visit on weekends. Private lorries had just started plying (buses were called lorries then) and took three hours. Chhoti Chachi was greatly peeved at this. 'Majhhale Jethji is home all the time, so what's so special about your studies? Or is it that you have taken fancy to another woman?' Chhote Rai would only say : 'One's more than I can handle.' He was also interested in tennis and sometimes played hockey too. Majhhale Rai hated strenuous games and loved to appear well-groomed and well-dressed in public.

The majority of the teachers in those days used to be Englishmen and they maintained good relations with students. Powell Price was the history teacher. He and Chhote Rai were often partners in tennis. He was married but his wife was still in England. He often spoke of his wife to Chhote Rai. To him, his wife was nonpareil— unsurpassed by any other wife in the world. Compared to her, the rest were all women. A wife is not the same thing as a woman, he used to say, and added : 'When my wife comes to India, I'll introduce you to her. She's very charming.' And he'd ask : 'Won't you introduce me to yours?'

Powell Price knew only English. Whenever his tongue loosened too much, Chhote Rai resorted to Hindi. 'Our wives don't parade themselves barelegged and bareheaded before other men, you stupid owl!'

'What was that you said?' Powell Price would ask.

'I said I'd be only too glad to meet your wife. It'd be my extreme good fortune. But, you know, we're very backward people. Our women stay in purdah.' Chhote Rai would explain in English.

'But I'm your friend.' Powell Price said.

'Yes, yes, wasn't it as a friend that you entered this country? Now you want to enter my home as a friend? And leave me without a home as well as a country? Haven't you sucked us dry already?' Chhote Rai would fire away in Hindi and sometimes resorted to plain abuse.

Asked to explain, he'd laugh : 'Sir, you're not my friend; you're my teacher. For us a teacher ranks very high.'

Powell Price, swaying like a drunk, would lisp : 'No, no, I'm your friend.'

'Called yourself a friend again. . . bloody enemy!' Any friends who happened to be around would have a hard time trying to suppress their laughter.

'What gibberish is that do you lapse into every now and then?' he'd ask

'You see when we have nice things to say about anyone we always use our mother tongue. Nothing like your own tongue when it comes to expressing love or praise, or when having a fight.' Powell Price would be greatly impressed and would nod vigorously in appreciation. Chhote Rai would continue in English : 'What a simple and nice person you are, Mr. Price, despite the fact that you're an Englishman!'

He would be charmed and would start nodding even more vigorously.

Chhote Rai was full of Powell Price jokes. On one occasion, Chhote Rai and his friends decided to play a prank on Powell Price with the explicit intent of testing whether Indians could also fool the British for a change. Majhhale Rai disagreed with this attitude of Chhote Rai. He always greeted his British teachers with a deep bow as if they were his superior officers. His feeling towards his teachers was not one of respect but one of sheer terror. A person of the ruling race, he used to say, is basically a ruler, no matter whether he is a teacher or something else. Never get too close to

him, or take him lightly. You never know when he might turn on you. To annoy an officer is to invite a calamity. Annoyance makes the white man blind. The next thing you know is that he has stuffed you, hands and feet tied, into a garbage can. Yes, the garbage can is the Englishman's favourite disposal site. Chhote Rai never saw eye to eye with Majhhale Rai on this. His argument was that tyranny thrives on acquiescence. The more you allow yourself to be tyrannized, the more the tyrant tyrannizes you. The tyrant gets wise to the fact that his opponent lacks a spine. Majhhale Rai put up a stiff resistance to Chhote Rai's scheme. Powell Price was not only a professor, he was a British professor! They aren't a race to be fooled or trifled with! Chhote Rai tried very hard to persuade Majhhale Rai to treat it as a joke. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll apologise, he said. All that we're going to do is to offer him a pān (a betel leaf). Pān symbolises our culture, and he will never refuse it. All that we are keen to see is the look on his face after he's had a pān : will it be that of a man or a monkey?

Chhote Rai had a friend, Mahavir Jain. Everybody called him Kankatā Sahib because a corner of one of his ears was missing. He was always immaculately attired in a necktie and a tailcoat. He was the only son of his father. His father enjoyed revenue collection rights over a state and had amassed an enormous fortune by virtue of these rights. Kankatā Sahib was the sole inheritor of this fortune. Another distinctive characteristic feature of Kankatā Sahib was his nasal speech. This had earned him the additional sobriquet of Naknakā Sahib from some. His language was always English, even when he was spoken to in Hindi. He also flaunted all the trappings of his status. Instead of a tonga or a coach, he patronized a gig so no crawlers and toadies could sit next to him. It was also rumoured that he patronized the western type commode and not the Indian style toilet bowl; he didn't have a bath : he performed toilet; for urination, he used the chamber-pot which the jamādār promptly rinsed. No one had ever seen him urinating in a public place or using an unclean toilet. One morning Kantatā Sahib was out for a stroll, when he experienced an urgent call of

nature. He looked around. It was the hour of dawn and still a bit dark. In those days stormwater drains of the natural variety ran alongside the roads. Overlaid with grass, they ran full during the rains. Kankatā Sahib strained every muscle to ride on his will power to his rooms but was overpowered, and had to take recourse to a drain. The pressure was thus relieved, and no mean relief it was, but then arose the tricky question of toilet. First he experimented with a clod. When that failed, a scented handkerchief had to be sacrificed. If was a popular perfume— Evening in Paris. Unfortunately, at this juncture, a college friend appeared on the scene and was witness to the proceedings. During the entire remaining period of that friend's stay in college, Naknakā Sahib had to pay him a tribute of a glass of milk and a certain quantity of his favourite sweet everyday so that the compromising truth may not see the light of the day, producing adverse consequences for his reputation as a sahib.

Apart from thinking of himself as an Englishman, Mahavir Jain also considered himself a close friend of the English. Chhote Rai persuaded him to invite Powell Price to his rooms and to treat him to a pān. Mahavir Jain considered it a great honour and agreed readily. Majhhale Rai of course found the whole thing extremely disagreeable and departed promptly for home. He was to leave for home anyway.

There was a renowned pān-seller at the Budhānā Gate. In those days of cheap prices he sold kushtā (gold or silver dust) pāns for a hundred rupees. He was patronized by the rich out of an uncomplicated desire to safeguard their reputation for luxury living. Chhote Rai arranged for a variety of spices— jāvitri, cardamon, cinnamon, clove, etc. to be put in the pān. Chhote Rai always carried his silver pān box with him. Powell Price often dropped into his rooms in the evenings on their way back from the tennis courts. The British had the greatest respect for a good player, and if he also happened to be a partner, their regard was boundless. On the stipulated day, Chhote Rai, instead of bringing him to his rooms, took him to Mahavir Jain's quarters. Mahavir had rolled out the red carpet : there were expensive rugs and cushions on the floor,

and four walnut chairs with ivory carvings and red velvet cushions had been acquired on loan. Powell Price took the room in at a glance and sat himself down. Although Mahavir was not his student, Powell Price knew him as Chhote Rai's friend. It was Chhote Rai who set the ball rolling. He asked in English :

'Sir, have you ever tasted a pān?'

'No. I wonder how a plain leaf can stain your lips red.'

'Why don't you have one today?'

'No, thanks. The leaves in this country are poisonous.'

'But the pān is a sacred leaf. It's a symbol of Indian culture.' Then Chhote Rai continued in Hindi : 'Come on, you monkey, taste one.'

'What's so great about a pān? Why do people like it?'

'You're an owl.'

'What?'

'I was saying, sir, that pān is the source of male potency and it purifies the mouth. It can fill you with such vitality and vigour that you could break out in sweat in the hardest winter.'

Powell Price reflected on this. Chhote Rai now prodded Mahavir Jain.

'Why don't you say something?'

Mahavir Jain could produce only one short sentence :

'Yes, sir, do try.'

Powell Price was deep in reflection now. Chhote Rai kept up his prattle in Hindi : 'Are you going to eat or shall I shove it down your throat? I've paid a rupee for it– a whole rupee, do you understand? Have you ever seen a pān that costs a rupee?'

Mahavir Jain now produced another sentence :

'Please, sir, do eat, sir!'

Powell Price wanted to know something else :

'Why does Raghav Rai gibber now and then? What does he say?'

'I said if you didn't taste pān, your Indian journey would have no meaning. In the Indian tradition pān eating has been considered absolutely essential for kings and queens. One cannot hope to understand Indian history unless one understands pān and eats it.'

'All right, then. I'll have one.'

Mahavir had arranged the pāns in gold and silver dishes. Chhote Rai quietly switched the pāns, substituting his own gold-foiled pān for the one intended for Powell Price. Powell Price was thrilled.

'This is golden!' he piped up.

'The foil is pure gold,' said Chhote Rai.

Powell Price turned it around in his hands and continued to examine it. Chhote Rai kept smiling : 'Bloody monkey. . .'

When he was fully assured that there was nothing wrong with the pān, Powell Price popped it into his mouth.

That morning, Chhote Rai had borrowed Mahavir Jain's mirror and forgotten to return it. He wanted to make sure that Powell Price doesn't took into it. Now Powell Price rolled the pān around in his mouth and chewed softly. His eyes looked as if they were trying to see the taste of the pāu. In another moment, his eyes began to stream and red juice showed at the corners of the mouth. The mouth was stuffed full but he wanted to speak. The moment he opened the mouth a little, the juice streaked down. The first time this happened he gulped the juice down and managed to speak.

'It's hot. . . but perfumed.'

Rai remarked softly : 'A monkey thou art, a dragonfly thou shalt be! Let it work a little!'

Whenever Chhote Rai spoke in Hindi, Price always promptly asked, 'What was that you said? Even in his present condition, he couldn't help asking it.

Mahavir Jain was at a loss to understand what could've brought about this condition. He'd only offered him a plain and simple pān. He was worrying about what 'Sir' would think after this, when Chhote Rai nudged him encouragingly to speak. So he nasalized :.

'You're looking great, sir!'

Since his mouth was full, Powell Price swung his neck around to accept the compliment. His clothes were now streaked with betel juice. Swinging his tennis racket., Price raced towards his bungalow. Passersby stared at him. They couldn't, of course, laugh at an

Englishman to his face, so they screened their laughter. Totally unmindful of their predicament, and swinging his racket, Price stuck to his flight path.

Later Majhhale Rai enjoyed the prank thoroughly, but he also issued a warning against the repetition of such pranks : 'If Price had the slightest suspicion of what you were up to, you'd have been thrown out of college.' Moreover, he simply couldn't forgive Kankatā Sahib for his role in the incident. He didn't expect a loyal subject like him to indulge in such activities. As it was, Majhhale Rai had few friends. Now he removed Kankatā Sahib too from his list of friends. His interaction was now limited to Chhote Rai. He sincerely believed that the less the interaction boys of upper class families had with lower class boys, the better they'd be able to protect their upper class character. He tried very hard to explain this to Chhote Rai, but Chhote Rai turned a deaf ear to his explanations. Majhhale Rai had always hated the idea of socialising with the British, or maintaining a relationship of equality with them. According to him, the ruler and the ruled were worlds apart and could never meet. How'd we feel, he argued, if those who we rule sought equality with us? The British must feel the same way about us. How can we compare ourselves with them? Majhhale Rai was thinking that incase Powell Price took offence at the pān incident, he'd not spare Chhote Rai. But the effect was exactly the opposite. Powell Price was immensely pleased. Now he wanted a pān everyday. In the meantime his wife had also arrived and he took on for her too. He had now taken it into his head that pān-chewing lent greater intimacy to conjugal relations.

The close friendship between Powell Price and Chhote Rai soon made the former an object of unfavourable comment among his English friends. Why do you befriend these Indians, they'd ask. Use them and dump them. That's all they are good for. Powell Price always picked up a fight with such friends. How can you understand them if you don't come close to them, he'd ask. Theirs is a rich cultural tradition. And sometimes he'd turn the tables on his critics. To understand India you must acquire the historical perspective, he argued. You must study Indian history. We're the

most self-centred race in the world. We can't bear thinking about any other country and any other people. We didn't have enough land to till so we industrialised. We needed dual- pu..,ose markets to buy raw material from and sell ready goods to, so we colonised various parts of the world and put their progress on hold. Those colonies turned out to be goldmines of raw material and cheap labour for us. We never for a moment considered what our fate would have been had the same been done to us. We had neither the old memories, nor the culture that countries like India, Greece and Rome had. But we had a tremendous capacity to build relations on force and then to exploit them to the hilt. This was what he also taught his students, who were astonished to hear an Englishman speaking ill of his own country and countrymen. Majhhale and Chhote Rai carried his tales home where Bade Rai was no less astonished to hear them. Although he never offered any comment, he used to wonder if this wasn't the end of the road for the British. When this is how one begins to think about one's own people, the end can only be round the corner for the whole race.

Other British teachers approached the Principal Donnell, with a formal complaint against Powell Price. Donnell gave them a very patient hearing. Finally, he asked : 'Does he distort the facts or does he offer fresh interpretations for the facts?'

This effectively silenced the delegation Donnell was an Irishman and his way of thinking was at variance with that of the English. Bade Rai held that the Irish had always tried to pull down the English, while the English had always embraced them and honoured them with high positions. In any case, Donnell now delivered himself of a lecture :

'If a teacher misrepresents the facts, takes liberties with them, and is unable to offer a logical explanation for doing so, then he is to be held responsible for it, and can be asked for an explanation. But, on the other hand, if he offers a new, but logically valid, interpretation of the facts, it is his right, even his duty, to do so and he must not be prevented from it, whether or not we like his interpretation. History is after all not religion. Even religions are open to diverse interpretations, and many teachers have sometimes

offered such interpretations at great risks to themselves. The king may be the highest authority in the administrative hierarchy, but, in the classroom, it is the teacher who's the king. A good teacher is like a good singer. The grammar of a musical piece is one and the same, but each musician renders it in his own individual style. And within his style he enjoys total autonomy. The teacher too is a singer. In his concern for his freedom, and in his total immersion in his work, a teacher is in no way inferior to a singer.'

Chastened by Donnell's lecture, the teachers came away quietly.

Majhhale Rai got so annoyed with Price that he gave up his subject. Chhote Rai had made a mildly taunting remark : 'An Englishman speaking against his own people! And what have we been doing all along?' This provoked Majhhale Rai no end. How can we compare ourselves with them, he asked. Chhote Rai laughed it away. Majhhale Rai was one of those who believed that the British owned the world. All scientific progress— trains, motor cars, foreign cloth, flashlights, ships, you name it— was a product of the miraculous British mind. Everything we had we got from the British. Bade Rai agreed. In fact, he more than agreed. For him, even justice was a British gift to us. But for them, we'd have slaughtered one another. Chhote Rai, of course, never contradicted Bade Rai, but when Majhhale Rai repeated the same thing he never let it pass. 'What's this you keep on about, Majhhale Bhai! I agree the British are a courageous lot, and clever too. I also agree that it's no mean achievement for such a small country to have the entire world under its heels, but what about us? Such a big country we are, and all that we can do is to act like hobnails in their boots, adding to their tyrannical strength and helping them to crush us harder! How much longer shall we let our respect for others rob us of our respect for ourselves?'

Majhhale Rai never quite grasped these arguments. The only thing he grasped clearly was that his brother was challenging the authority of the British government. Bade Rai had also got wind of his rebellious views and he was deeply concerned. If the news leaked out to the government, the Rai prestige would be mud. For

centuries now, the Rai family had enjoyed British patronage and owed its prestige to it. Hence when Chhote Rai came home on the next vacation, Bade Rai called him and put it to him directly:

'Raghav, is it true that you have now started hobnobbing with the surājīs (freedom fighters)?'

Chhote Rai was surprised : 'No, Bade Bhaiya, who told you this?'

Bade Rai waited for a while before speaking.

'You were speaking against the British to Krishna? Do you know that it's because of the British that we live in honour and in peace? If you annoy them, and they make up their minds that we're traitors, all this glory and the splendour won't last a minute. Each one of us will share the fate of the bullock in the oil- press. A ruler is a ruler by virtue of his ability to have his word obeyed, by the fear he exercises in the minds of the people. Hobnobbing with beggars and destitutes, inciting them and talking rot against the government won't get you anything, let alone get you self-rule! What do the beggars know about power and how to exercise it?'

For a moment Raghav thought : If speaking my mind is hobnobbing with the *Surajis*, then so be it! But, of course, he couldn't open his mouth before Bade Rai. So he tried to control himself and only said :

'It takes courage to hobnob with the *Surājīs*, Bhaiya. Where can we, sons of *zamindars*, get that courage? Only those who can renounce everything, renounce the land and all the power and the prestige that goes with it, can set their hearts on the freedom of the country. Not people like me who've been brought up on luxuries bought at the price of our freedom, and who cherish the slavery that buys them comforts. Majhhale Bhaiya got me wrong : in fact I was complimenting an Englishman. I don't know what made him so mad that he walked out of Powell Price's class.'

Bade Rai was all ears. When Chhote Rai had finished, he looked at him searchingly and said :

'Look here, Raghav. You may talk of Powell Price or Dick or whoever, but as far as I know you; I can hear the stirrings of a rebellion against the British in your mind. Let me make it very

clear that if you don't stop these activities I'll have to withdraw you from college.'

Chhote Rai lowered his eyes and removed himself from the room without uttering a word.

In bed that night, Chhote Rai was going over what had transpired earlier in the day between him and Bade Rai. Chhoti Chachi, his wife, wanted to know.

'Bade Jethji's remarks are bothering you, aren't they?' she said.

'Not quite. What's bothering me is something else. How can we go on like this? Times are changing, but we want to hold fast to our positions. If you move with the times, the times move with you. If you remain steadfast like a rock, you'll someday be blown up with dynamite or crumble in an earthquake.'

'What's that you are saying!'

'I'm saying exactly what you're hearing. I'm scared but I also see hope.'

'I don't understand.'

'How can you? When the men of this house don't want to understand, what need is there for the women to strain their minds? As it is, they hardly ever get to see the light of the day.'

Chachi held her peace for a little while. Then she spoke on a different matter.

'You'd promised to take me to the English lady doctor in Meerut. Majhhali Chachi has already been to see her. Jethji took her there under the pretext of taking her to her parents' place.'

Chhote Rai gave a laugh and said :

'Why do you want to produce slaves like us? We're a line of frogs.'

'What are you saying?' Chachi was genuinely alarmed.

'I'm only saying what I really feel.'

Chachi didn't quite get the import of Chhote Rai's remarks. She went on :

'I'd consider my life's purpose accomplished if I can produce even a mouse.'

Chhote Rai now laughed aloud.

'If a mouse is what you want, why go to all this trouble? I can produce any number and let them loose on your bed as queens in fairy stories do.'

Chachi now started crying. Perhaps the joke had been carried too far.

The next day it was a grief-ridden Chhote Rai who returned to college. He'd had absolutely no intention of causing hurt to Chhoti Chachi.

Mahavir Jain alias Kankatā alias Naknakā Sahib wasn't the only friend Chhote Rai had. There was another friend— Rajvansh. Rajvansh was the prince of a small state but extremely tight- fisted. The servants who worked for him were not allowed to eat in the kitchen. They had to cook their own meals. Sometimes they had nothing to cook, so they went hungry or scraped the leftovers from the hostel messes, though this was not always possible. In a sense they were all bonded slaves. Rajvansh himself would sometimes eat with Mahavir Jain and at other times raided the kitchens of his other friends. In fact, the fires weren't lighted in his kitchen at least ten or twelve days a month. He was also chummy with Majhhale Rai, who didn't mind his mealtime visits; in fact, they made him happy. However, if Chhote Rai happened to invite friends, Majhhale Rai began to frown. Nor would he ever lend anyone money. Chhote Rai, on the other had, was always out of pocket : his money was always out on loan. That however never created a problem for him.

Everyone complained that Rajvansh, though always scrounging off others, never once entertained any of his friends. Some went even to the extent of doubting his princely status. More likely a jamādār was their opinion. Mahavir Jain was one of the longest-suffering victims of Rajvansh's careful attitude towards money. Practically everyone therefore was keen to see Rajvansh chastened, but the occasion never presented itself. Rajvansh was a regular visitor to the grave of a Muslim saint, or pīr, in the artillery grounds, where he lighted a lamp every jumā night. He'd been led

to believe that if the pīr was pleased with him, he'd not only pass his exams but would also ascend the Raja's seat without delay. His father, the present Raja, was a profligate and a very sick man. The rānī was a stepmother. So Rajvansh didn't have many reasons for going home. Whenever any of his friends presented their complaint directly to him and requested it to be remedied with a feast or two, his excuse was always the same : 'Just let me lay my hands on the reins of the state and you'll see there are feasts galore!'

One day Chhote Rai and Mahavir arrived at Rajvansh's rooms to discover that he had gone to the pir's grave to light the weekly lamp. Promptly they took another route to the place, collecting a white sheet from his room on the way out. Once there, they concealed themselves behind a pīpal tree. Rajvansh lighted the lamp and then turned to leave. As he did so, a voice boomed :

'Empty-handed? You come here to light the lamp empty-handed and you hope to become the Raja!'

With the voice there rose a white-clad figure from behind the pīpal tree. Rajvansh mustered courage and stammered :

'Who. . . who. . . are you?'

The figure burst out laughing. Now Rajvansh was scared.

'I'm the one you come here to pray to every jumā night.'

Rajvansh was now shivering with fear. He could barely manage to utter the words :

'What're my instructions?'

'One seer of kalākand every jumā night. Or all your dreams will be shattered.'

The figure sank, then disappeared.

Rajvansh made a dash to Chhote Rai's rooms. Naknakā Sahib was already present. The two were greatly amused over something. Rajvansh, perspiring profusely, was finding it difficult to speak. When they saw him Chhote Rai and Naknakā assumed a grave demeanour. Barely able to suppress his amusement, Chhote Rai inquired very solicitously :

'Why're you out of breath? What happened?'

'The pīr. . . he actually came out of the tree. I. . .I. . . just

managed to escape with my life.' It took Rajvansh a lot of effort to produce the words.

This gave the two a release. They burst out laughing. Chhote Rai said :

'You're crazy. What pīr? There's no such thing! Someone's played a trick on you.'

Mahavir added for good measure :

'You're deluding yourself : that's what it is. You want to pass the exam without putting in any work! You want to ascend the gaddī (Raja's seat) with your father still living! That's why you depend on the pīr's favours, just as Krishna Rai depends on the favours of the British.'

'You don't understand. I saw him with my own eyes. He was as high as this door here.'

'Oh! Come off it! Someone's played a prank. . .' Chhote Rai repeated himself.

'Did he only show himself, or did he also speak to you?' Mahavir Jain asked.

'He said to make an offering of a seer of kalākand every jumā night or he'll crush all my dreams.'

'What nonsense! You think the pīr will come personally to eat it? You're crazy. You go and get the kalākand and give it to us. We'll deal with the pīr.'

'No way! If the Pīr wants it he gets it! What happens if I fail the exam? What happens if the gaddi gets delayed?'

'Look, the *gaddi* is yours in any case. After all, you are the sole heir, aren't you? Who can take it away from you?'

'Bade Raja has been bed-ridden for ages. God knows how much longer he may carry on that way. And then there's Chhoti Ma. . .'

'Ah! So you wish early death to Bade Raja! Why don't you do a Macbeth then? Take yourself to Professor Hilton, the English professor.'

'No. . . no. . . I didn't mean that. But he spends so much! The estate is going bankrupt! If he survives for another four or six years, there'll be nothing left.'

Now Chhote Rai was serious.

'Does the estate mean more to you than your fatner or your brother. . ?'

'No. . . no. . ., but I do wish some of the estate were left when. . .'

'In that case, the offering has to be made,' observed Kankatā Sahib, 'And if you want quick results, double the offering.'

'Do you think the pīr will be able to eat that much?'

'Come on, he too has his flunkeys and hangers-on. He'll eat whatever he can, others will share the rest.'

Rajvansh pondered this for a while. Then he suddenly got up to leave.

'I must go now!' he said.

'You might as well make the offering. Start next jumā night.' Chhote Rai offered a parting suggestion. Rajvansh made no reply.

Next Friday night, Rajvansh reached the spot, a bundle of sweets in his hands. Chhote Rai and Kankatā were already there, concealed behind the tree. Rajvansh made the offering, then said:

'Pīr Badshah! A seer of sweets is a lot of money. Already Bade Raja is squandering the estate. I've brought half-a-seer.'

The voice thundered : 'How dare you defy my orders? Get half-a- seer of imaratī from the next *jumā* night!'

'No. . . no. . . please! I'll get you a seer of *kalākand.* as you'd ordered.'

'All right, I'll pardon you this time. Now, go!'

He left. The two came out of their hiding, picked up the leaf bowl of sweets and joined their friends in the hostel. The feast started.

Rajvansh got wind of it a few days later. He felt so ashamed he gave up his studies and went back home.

About this time there was a riot in the city. These were days of the freedom struggle. The British had shot two freedcm fighters and injured several others. Boys in th college were agitated. They stopped a car being driven alone by the daughter of a British officer. The boys later claimed that they'd done nothing more than this.

She saw them, screamed, and collapsed. She never regained consciousness. The death of a white girl shook the entire administration. In reality the boys only wanted to convey it to the British that the Indian people were now desperate and ready to take them on. They intended to let her go after giving her a scare. But when she fainted, the boys panicked. They could only think of one thing : go to their Principal, Donnell, and make a clean breast of it.

It was evening. Donnell sat in the lawn with his wife. When he saw a crowd of boys at the gate of his bungalow, he came out. 'What can I do for you, my boys?' he asked. 'Do you have a problem?'

At first no one spoke. Everyone looked at one another. Then someone picked up courage and described the whole incident : how they'd stopped her car, shouted slogans at her, and how she'd screamed and fainted with fear. Donnell stood silent for a moment, then asked :

'Is that the truth?'

'Yes. We swear.'

He scrutinised their faces individually as if to ascertain if they were speaking the truth, then asked :

'Where's the body?'

'In the forest, behind the Begum Bridge.' It was a forest then.

Donnell took out his car. Chhote Rai was one of the crowd. Being a good tennis player, he was known personally to the Principal. The Principal took him and one more boy with him and drove off. He instructed the others to wait at the bungalow till he returned. The forest extended a long way along the drain. Throughout the drive Chhote Rai was seized with the fear that Donnell might hand them over to the police. What'd Bade Rai think then? It was also possible that he might just take them into the forest and shoot them dead. Avenge the death of one British girl with two Indian lives.

Donnell drove with extreme caution. The hair at the end of his thick, brown moustache quivered with concentration. When they entered the forest, he asked :

'Was she raped?'

The other boy kept quiet, but Chhote Rai said in a firm voice:

'No, sir. She fainted immediately and never recovered. We even splashed water on her face.'

'She could've have been raped?'

'I don't think so. We were only trying to scare her.'

He stopped where the boys had hidden the car under a mound of leaves and branches. The body still lay in the car. One of her hands was dangling out of the window. The moment Donnell saw the body he sucked in his breath and froze. Then a tear rolled down his cheek. Recovering, he beckoned to the boys. Chhote Rai supported the head, the other boy lifted the legs, Donnell slipped his hand under the waist and they heaved the body onto the backseat of Donnell's car.

Something had shaken Donnell. He was now driving very fast. Darkness had descended and the roads were already deserted. Unlike modern times when you can see people on the roads till late hours, the natives never came out for strolls then. Everyone was home by early evening. The rich went off to their clubs or to the dancing girls.

Only once during the drive did Donnell open his mouth :

'She's Alice. My friend Colonel Herbert's daughter. When she was a baby, I dandled her on my knees. What have you done, my boys!'

His voice broke.

When they reached the bungalow, the boys were still waiting in absolute silence. Together they lifted the body from the car and took it to the garden in the rear of the house with full honours. Some of the boys were crying. Such a horrible end to so beautiful a girl! Donnell had escorted his wife into the house. For a few minutes raised voices could be heard, then sobs. When they came out again, they were holding up well. Mrs Donnell washed Alice's body and put a new dress on it, her own wedding dress. Biting her lips, she was trying very hard to fight back her tears. Donnell read from the Bible. A coffin was arranged and the body was placed

in it. The boys dug the grave. Finally, using some ropes, the coffin was lowered into the grave. When it was being covered with earth, both Donnell and his wife burst into sobs. Mrs Donnell's lips moved constantly : 'We bury their daughter and they don't even know! Jesus! Forgive us our sins.' Donnell maintained a stony silence and tried to console his wife.

When it was all over Donnell had some earthen flower pots placed on the spot. Then he turned to the boys and said :

'I know, boys, you're fighting a war of freedom. Against us, who are crushing your freedom under our heels. But this. . . this. . . is not right. What has happened is not right. To safeguard the life of the individual is the highest goal of freedom. There's no greater proof of slavery than the killing of innocents— no matter to which race, to what country they belong. We have ourselves not honoured this principle; therefore, I have no right to ask you to honour it. There's no forgiveness for murder. . . not even in the hands of God. . . no matter what the reason for the murder. . . no matter who the victim. Such a horrible death for one so young. . . so gentle. . . so full of promise. . . I did not wish the shadow of death to hang over hundreds of you. . . for this one child. . . so I committed this sin. . . I denied even her parents their right to a last glimpse. . . but you're as much to blame for this sin as I am. . . I committed this sin because I believe you. . . I believe that you're speaking the truth. May God forgive me, may He forgive us both. I wish it to remain a secret, at least for some time.'

The boys left. They were so deeply affected that no one had his dinner that night and no one spoke. Their lips were sealed.

The next week, Donnell sent his wife to home in Britain.

The city had been turned inside out. There was a wave of arrests. Alice was nowhere to be found. The authorities saw a political motive behind her disappearance. Politicians were being harassed. Since her parents were friends of the Donnells, a man came to their bungalow to check if Missi Baby had shown up there. When the man came, Donnell had just lighted a candle at the spot where she'd been buried. He couldn't speak. He didn't even ask what the

matter was. He just shook his head. The man went away.

The police suspected that the students had murdered Alice. The car had been found. There were no bloodstains, nor any sign of a struggle. The only clue that had been found was that a car had visited the spot. A bunch of students was also known to have gone in that direction at around four in the afternoon and surrounded Alice's car. Donnell had issued strict directions to the students not to stir out of the hostel and the college as long as the city was in the grip of tension. The college had been closed down. Donnell was being repeatedly told by the district administration that his students were behind the disappearance of Alice, but Donnell was quite firm. Till some definite proof is produced, the police cannot be allowed to harass my students, he said. Donnell was a retired army colonel and the police was a bit overawed by him. Besides he'd told the Police Captain that Alice was his friends' daughter and that he was more concerned about her disappearance than perhaps even the police. It was a personal loss for him. While saying this, his voice would break, and all the Police Captain could do was to salute and make a quick exit.

The police came again and again, but returned empty-handed. Donnell was like a rock. Grievously injured inwardly, he'd cry 'Alice,' 'Alice' and beg her forgiveness when alone. He spent hours at her grave praying silently. Since the college had been closed down indefinitely, Chhote Rai had also returned home. It seemed as if the cat had got his tongue. All his laughter had left him. He'd stay confined to his room all the day long. Chachi was worried. She pestered him : 'What's the matter with you ? Why don't you speak ?' he didn't know what to say. He didn't wish to break his promise to Donnell, who'd taken such a big risk to protect their lives. Alice's pretty face would come dancing before his eyes. She'd let out a scream and then fallen silent–forever. Actually, some boys had tried to drag her out of the car, though no one had told Donnell about it. Seeing her hand flung out of the car and a few scratches on it, he'd guessed the truth himself. Donnell's tear-soaked face would swim into Chhote Rai's vision, and then he'd see the two of them sobbing like children when the coffin was being lowered into the grave.

Newspapers had flashed the news of Alice's disappearance. Everyone had condemned the foul deed. But Donnell had kept quiet. He'd not issued any statement, nor had he been mentioned in any of the reports. The British were furious. They were looking for a chance to avenge themselves on the Indians. At many places, the police had entered the houses and harassed the womenfolk. People would ask Chhote Rai; Is this, or that, true? But Chhote Rai never once opened his mouth.

Try hard as they did, the police could never find a clue.

The English lady doctor found nothing wrong with Majhhali Chachi. However, she told Majhhale Rai to get himself examined. Men of course start with the assumption that nothing can be wrong with them— this was specially true then. So Majhhale Rai was mad at the lady doctor. He was shocked at her immodesty. How could she bring such words to her feminine lips? But he came away without a word to her. If she hadn't been English, he'd surely have let her have it. All he could say to the English doctor was : 'Madam, this is India, not England.' As if in England males were all impotent!

This was the beginning of Majhhale Rai's estrangement from his wife. He started drawing away from her and finally stopped even talking to her. There was a time when he ran away from college to be with her; now he completely turned his back on her. Chachi went to the extent of falling at his feet. Face streaked with tears, she begged him to tell her what wrong she'd done, what unpardonable sin she'd committed. But he refused to yield. He would turn his face away in disgust, or would push her away; once or twice he even spat at her. She began to wither away. She lost appetite and began to get weaker by the day. A glowing beauty once, her face was now all bones. The complexion began to look a faded black. The will to live was leaving her. Like the crumbling wall of a deserted, tumble-down hut, she could collapse any moment. The only person in the house she could, or would, talk to was Chhoti Chachi, but when Chhoti Chachi asked her anything her eyes would fill up again. On one occasion, hoping to divert her mind, Chhoti Chachi asked her · 'Dīdī, tell me about the mem

doctor you'd gone to. What did she do? How did she examine you? I've been asking my husband too to take me to her.'

It was as if she'd seen a ghost. Fear and alarm writ large on her face, Majhhali Chachi spluttered : 'No, no, never commit that mistake. Go and drown yourself in the river but don't go to her. This is all her doing. God knows what she told him that has turned my ife upside down. Only if my Jithānjī had been living. . I'd not have to see this day. I can neither speak nor keep my mouth shut. There's little poor Jethjī can do either. It was I who pestered him to take me to the mem doctor. If the mem said I'm barren, he can go and get another wife. I'll accept her, I'll even wait on her. . . but let him at least talk to me. Let him spare me this living death. . .' and she broke down again.

Listening to Majhhali Chachi would make Chhoti Chachi think of her own agony. Was a similar fate awaiting her? In fact, every woman is born with the same fate. If she has children, the husband is lost; if the husband is in line, something else is lost, and so it goes on. Jithānjī had everything— children, an all powerful husband— but all her life the husband's presence filled her with the same fear that fills the cow in the presence of the butcher. They had an army of servants, but she lost her eyes blowing at kitchen fires at odd times of day and night. And one day she just left this world, her hands still outstretched in unfulfilled longing. Sometimes Chhoti Chachi felt it couldn't happen to her : children or no children, Chhote Rai would never treat her that way. He has anyway mentally adopted Arun— so what if I haven't given him birth. What difference does it make— the child may be your own or may be taken as your own? It's of course easier to take him as your own if he's your own; it's tougher, a lot tougher, to take as your own one who isn't your own. Then she thought of Majhhale Rai again and a chill ran through her. A man who was so ready to lay down his life for his wife's beauty now didn't even want to look at her! Doesn't take a man long to change his mind : all one needs is an excuse!

Although she was afraid and quite uncertain how he'd react, Chhoti Chachi told her husband everything. She considered the

matter very carefully, time and again, before taking the step. Finally, she decided it would be best to speak out.

'Majhhale Jethji doesn't even speak to Majhhali Jithānī. . . he's a changed man since the day they returned after consulting the mem doctor. . . she now doesn't mean anything to him. . .' And then the question that had been bothering her came tumbling out :

'Would you also do the same to me?'

Chhote Rai looked lovingly at her :

'You're crazy!' he said.

'I too am childless.'

'Why do you say that? We have Arun, we have Bhaskar.' he laughed. 'And there's of course me. . . after a certain point the husband is a child too.'

'The things you say. . .' she blushed. Then said :

'Yes, of course, they're our sons. . . but sometimes this fear gets hold of me.'

'What fear? You think I may change? But what if you give birth and they don't survive?'

A shiver ran through her body as if a terrible ill omen had occurred. Then she controlled herself and stated very matter-of-factly : 'A woman remains a mother at heart. She must have someone to call her own, children or no children. She wishes everyone well. But this is not what I was saying. What I was saying was . . . well . . you know. . . an elephant may wander from village to village, from door to door, but the one who becomes known is the one who owns him.'

Chhote Rai watched her intently. Then, laughing, asked :

'For you womenfolk, only a child you give birth to means anything; a child born to another woman can claim nothing. Is that it?'

'Of course not. But she's first the mother of her own child; mother of the universe, only next. She must create the world that's to become hers; if she can't, all she can do is to beguile herself into thinking that that which is not hers is hers.'

'It seems to me that this is all you ever think about. I'll have

to take you to the dark mem, it seems.'

'The dark mem?' Her eyes were wide with wonder.

'Yes. Why?'

'What'll people say!'

'People? Don't people have children? Don't people need to go to the doctor, or to the midwife?'

'And if the mem says 'No chance!' will you also reject me?'

'No, but it's you who wants it. I want only you. And there are Bade Bhaiya's children. They're like our own, aren't they? We can abopt Arun, if you so wish.'

She gave up. 'If that's what you want.' she said and added after a pause :

'But I've heard the dark mem is a witch doctor. It she wants to give someone a child, she brings one and puts it next to her; if she doesn't, she removes the child born to her and makes her childless.'

Chhote Rai roared with laughter.

'Then she's indeed a Hidimbā,' he said.

Many were the yarns about the dark mem. One of them had almost become a legend. One night two or three Englishmen arrived at her house in a motor car. Cars were a rarity then : only one in hundreds of thousands had one. It used to have a bell, like the ones you have in trams, which rang if you pulled a string. The Englishmen rang this bell at the dark mem's door. When people saw a motor car in those days, they panicked and ran helter-skelter. Some took shelter in houses to escape the witch's vehicle, drawn neither by man nor beast. Others peeked at it hiding behind corners lest they be caught in the beam of its satanic vision. The Englishmen asked the dark mem to go with them to deliver a child. She readily agreed and took her seat in the car. Those times were different :

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weight disappeared and she was afraid all her earnings might have been stolen. She wasn't feeling tired any more. Sometimes she felt she was all alone, and she wanted to turn around and look behind her. Then she thought of the warning. She also thought of the strange child. He must be dead by now, she thought. Such infants do not survive long. Although fear-strickern, she kept on walking. Now and again, she thought she could hear a child running, making cooing noises. When she reached her house, she reasoned that now that she was home, no one could do anything to her, so why not turn around and take a look? So she turned around and took a look and saw the same woman and child following her. The child had grown up and was now a full-grown man. No sooner she saw this, she fell down unconscious. The basket fell off too, and all the gold coins turned into coal.

The next day people went to look at the place where the dark mem had been taken.. There were no ruins to be found there, nor any old bungalow. There were a couple of half-bare trees and a drain flowed nearby.

Chhote Rai refused to believe this story. 'Cock- and-bull,' he said. Such comments had earned him the reputation of a non-believer. Many were the people who tried to convince him that ghosts were for real, that they lived in houses like we did, that they had families, they produced and brought up children and, in fact, ghost wives even had rosaries counted to exorcise ghosts! Chhote Rai enjoyed this hugely. He'd ask : This means they must also have censuses. It's obvious they must outnumber us : After all, for hundreds of thousands of years, men have been turning into ghosts. And it's also possible that in a few years we will be wiped out completely. It'll be all ghosts then.'

People found it difficult to counter these arguments, so they simply declared Chhote Rai to be an irreligious person. Chhote Rai of course always wondered what ghosts and spirits had to do with religion. Kale sāīs was also a *sayānā* (a witch doctor). He exorcised spirits and also held power over ghosts. He claimed that ghosts and spirits were frequent visitors to his house. Like children of a neighbourhood collecting under a banyan tree for their evening

games, they collected near his house every evening. When they were with him, he'd not let anyone else come near him. On such occasions he'd be plaiting ropes for the horses and chatting up the ghosts. Sometimes he'd be weaving bird-cages out of bamboo strips while talking to them : 'Have you eaten yet? Where'll you be going now? Where're you coming from? How many kids?' If they gave him any replies, only he heard them. If they indulged in any mischief, he got angry : 'Behave yourself or I'll tie you up.' If he was disobeyed, he'd close one of the cages and hang it on a peg, and there the cage would hang all night. Next morning the ghost would be released after a lot of entreaty and prayer. He'd spent years practising his shamanic art on the two Chachis trying to cure them of their infertility. In fact, Chhoti Chachi did conceive once, but miscarried after a few months. Chhoti Chachi never acknowledged that she'd actually conceived. In her opinion the shaman had introduced some spirit in her womb which escaped the moment it found an opportunity. She hadn't done or experienced anything which could have caused a miscarriage.

Chhote Rai found all this talk very disturbing. He used to say that one of these days, talking of nothing but ghosts and spirits, we could ourselves turn into ghosts and spirits. This kind of talk, in its turn, made Chhoti Chachi very unhappy. If we insult them in this way, they'll never forgive us, she said. 'Who cares?' was Chhote Rai's instant reply.

He would in fact sometimes get angry : 'This useless talk is actually what keeps you in ignorance and makes you so restless, he would shout.

Chhoti Chachi was so scared by Majhhali Chachi's experience that she refused to go the dark mem. On the other hand, Chhote Rai refused to countenance shamanism and voodooism.

Majhhale Rai was an altogether different person now. He spent most of his time in Meerut. He had now lost whatever little interest he had in studies. He had also decided that his wife wasn't going to give him a child. The white lady doctor had told him a lie. It was possible that his wife had bribed her when alone with her. However, he didn't mind it much. What had really upset him was

what the doctor had told him. He'd taken it as a personal challenge. He was going to take a second wife and produce a child from her. I'll ask hear then : 'Tell me now. Am I a man or not? Want to come with me now?' He would start thinking all kinds of absurdities as if he could really go and tell her all those things.

The biggest stumbling block to his second marriage was Bade Rai. How could he make him understand his agony? He has children; would he understand? He had never married again after Bhabhi's death. Despite this, Majhhale Rai started looking around. Caste restrictions also didn't matter much for him now. He was doing everything on the sly, but Chhote Rai got an inkling of what he was up to. They had some common friends and news travelled to him on the grapevine. But Chhote Rai was faced with the same embarrassment : How to speak ill of Majhhale Rai to Bade Rai? He knew that Majhhale Rai didn't require much provocation to lose his temper.

One night, after both of them had lain down on their beds, the lights had been put out, and only a dim lamp cast its faded light on the wall, Chhote Rai asked his brother :

'Your home visits are getting very rare, bhaiya. Is anything the matter? I hope you haven't been quarrelling with bhabhi.'

Majhhale Rai was startled. 'What do you mean?' he said.

'Nothing in particular. Majhhali Bhabhi looked so miserable this time I was home.'

'You're worrying yourself needlessly.'

'But you're my brother and she's my bhabhi.'

'I can have nothing do with a wife who has ditched our line. A wife is one who helps to take the line forward.'

'Who told you that?'

'The doctor.'

'Which doctor?'

'How're you concerned with it?'

Chhote Rai pulled himself up short, thought a little, then said:

'Everyone is concerned with everyone. Without such concern, there's no life. . . and there's no death. In any case, we have all

along been putting the blame on women, but the blame could lie anywhere.'

Majhhale Rai sat up with a jerk. He turned up the lamp till it started smoking. Chhote Rai turned it down a little. Majhhale Rai roared :

'How dare you talk like that to me? Tell me. . . tell me. how am I to blame?' He pulled off the cloth round his waist and threw it aside.

Chhote Rai took him by the shoulders and tried to caim him down. He begged forgiveness for what he had said

'It was not at all my intention to hurt your feelings. Powell Price was telling me that there are doctors in England who specialise in marital relationships and offer useful advice. Sometimes the reasons behind male sterility are psychological; it's not always the woman who is responsible. A little treatment and everything is fine.'

'Why don't you get that 'little treatment'?'

Chhote Rai didn't pursue the matter further. He didn't mention the matter of the second marriage at all, although he knew that the marriage had almost been settled. He was very angry at this, but all that he said was : 'After you! Always after you!' and laughed out loud. Turning the lamp down, he went off to sleep. Majhhale Rai sat still, his breath going like a bellows as if he had just run a mile.

After a gap of a few days, Chhote Rai caught up with Majhhale Rai again.

'I hear you're planning a second marriage.'

'Who told you that?'

'Never mind who told me. I only want to tell you that it is not right. Not as long as bhabhi is living. This has never happened in our family before.'

'So what if I'm planning a second marriage? What's it got to do with others?'

'Everything. You were always running away from college to be with her. Now suddenly she means nothing to you? You are number two in the Rai family. You carry the family honour on your shoulders.'

'This is a personal matter.'

'Marriage? A personal matter? If marriage is a personal matter, why this tradition of collecting a big gathering on the occasion? More than a personal relationship, a marriage is a social act. The matter may be personal to you, but all of us are as closely linked to it as you are. Most of all, Majhhali Bhabhi. . .'

'You want me to give up my life for her?'

'If you can't give up your life for her, why are you bent on taking her life away?'

'Who are you to argue with me?'

'I may be no one, but Bade Bhaiya certainly has the right, hasn't he? Did you talk to him? He brought both of us up like a father. When the senior Rai died, we were little kids. If he'd so wanted he could have had us cut to pieces and buried. Have you ever thought of that?'

'So what if he had? The point is that we are now alive and it's our right to stay alive. When Badi Bhabhi died, didn't Bade Bhaiya contemplate marriage for a time?'

'But Majhhali Bhabhi's still alive.'

'Dead for me. For me, the question is one of my survival, and the survival of my line. This was exactly his consideration when Badi Bhabhi died, and this was exactly what he had said.'

'It was again your brother-in-law who had put him up to it. He even found a girl for him. At that time you were the one to make the greatest ballyhoo. You may remember that both of us had got together at that time and had decided to send our wives to Bade Bhaiya to tell him that remarriage would mean ruination for the family. The two of them had gone and had stood behind the door. Rani was asked to call Bade Bhaiya. When he'd listened to them he had stood with his head bowed and said : 'You two have opened my eyes.' His eyes were closed, but they could be opened. Your eyes are wide open, yet you do not see.'

Majhhale Rai was now fuming. There was fire in his eyes. Chhote Rai avoided looking at him. After a while, Majhhale Rai asked :

'Who'll carry on my line? Who'll inherit my share of the property?'

'Man has only one line and that's the line of humanity. Everyone who lives a life of honesty inherits that line.'

'You're talking in the air.'

'Does that mean that you want the property to be divided?'

'One day you'll want the same, despite all your airy-fairy talk today. At the end of the day, everyone wants a home to return to, a peg on which he can hang his shirt. I am not prepared to leave the entire property to Bade Bhaiya's sons to play ducks and drakes with.'

'I don't understand.'

'You'll never understand these things. To understand them, you need to have your feet planted on the ground, not hanging in the air. It's in Bade Rai's interest to keep the property undivided.'

'Majhhale Bhaiya, what's come over you?'

'Didn't our father cheat his younger brother out of his property? Uncle happened to be a simple, weak-minded person. He had kids but none survived. God knows why, but the fact is that none of them survived. Yes, a girl survived, but she was born at her mother's parents' place and was brought up there. He was declared insane, and we own all his property today. Should you overlook this history? Can't history be repeated?'

'Oh! I didn't know you'd sunk so low. And that you had such a low opinion of Bade Bhaiya.'

'Don't you worry. The day'll come when you too will share the same opinion. And if you don't, you will lose yourself in him without a trace.'

Chhote Rai had no answer to this. Try hard as he did, he could see no way of correcting the perverted thinking of his elder brother.

These slanging matches between the two brothers had become quite frequent, but they made no difference to Majhhale Rai's attitude to his wife. In fact, it was getting worse everyday. Things had deteriorated so much that if she served him his meals he flung the platter away. It was therefore now Rani who now served him

his meals, though she had also to look after Arun. One day when he had finished his meal, Majhhali Chachi fell at his feet and grovelled :

'Tell me : Where can I go? What shall I do? I came here holding your hand; if you turn your face away, who can I turn to? Who else is there for me to call my own? Even a piece of straw floating in the water has hope, hope that some day it will gain the bank. I don't even have that hope. Kill me if you will, but don't treat me with such loathing. Your hatred burns me even as my own love claws at my heart.'

'I want a child.'

'If you loathe me so much, how can you expect to have a child? After all it's love that begets children.'

He laughed aloud : 'Oh! I never knew you were so knowledgeable. I only know you can't produce a child even if I drown you in love.'

'Don't accuse me of what I'm not guilty of. I can produce a child.'

'Produce one then, if you are born of your true father.'

'Without you?'

'Yes, without me.'

Majhhali Chachi shuddered. Her blood sank to her feet and froze. She only muttered :

'You're my husband and you ask me to break the vow of marriage!'

'Yes, I want to see what that mem doctor of yours whom you bribed says when she sees you can't conceive even after you've broken the vow of marriage.'

Majhhale Rai pushed her away with his feet and walked out of the room. Chachi cried and cried for days on end. Then one day she stopped. It was as if she was slowly turning into stone. Chhoti Chachi did all she could to console her, but nothing had any effect on her. Her lips now produced no words, her eyes only a blank stare.

Majhhale Rai failed his exams that year. He was a year ahead of

Chhote Rai in college and now he gave up studies. Bade Rai tried to convince him to complete his Intermediate Examination, but he refused to change his decision. The state of Uttar Pradesh was then called the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh. The state Home Secretary, Mr. Murray, was a friend of Bade Rai. Bade Rai wrote to him and got Majhhale Rai nominated as Naib Tehsildar. In those days it was common for sons of big zamindars to be nominated to various posts. Had Majhhale Rai passed B.A., he'd have been nominated to the post of Deputy Collector.

When Majhhale Rai went to take up his job, he left his wife behind. In fact, he did not even say goodbye to her. Majhhali Chachi had started music lessons. A teacher (Ustādjī) came everyday. Chachi sat behind a curtain. If the teacher had been an elderly person, the curtain would've been unnecessary. Nonetheless, it was nothing short of a wonder that Bade Rai had allowed a male teacher to enter the female quarters of the house to teach music to a bahu of the family. It was entirely possible that Chhote Rai was the one instrumental in bringing this about. But Majhhali Chachi was sick within, and getting sicker everyday. Soon she took to her bed. She could often be heard muttering to herself : 'My child. . . my child.' When Majhhale Rai was informed about it, he was totally unconcerned. Then a messenger was sent to fetch him but he still refused to come. Chhote Rai then decided to approach Bade Rai and told him the whole story. Bade Rai was stunned. So much had transpired under his very nose, and he had had no inkling of it! For the first time that day I heard him mention my mother : 'Had your bhabhi been alive,' he told Chhote Rai, 'Would I have remained in the dark like this? While so much was happening under my roof, I lived like a stranger in my own house! My own brother's wife suffered so much and. . .'

Bade Rai walked over to the rooms of Majhhali Bhabhi. He stood at the door and said :

'You suffered so much and never uttered a word to me about it! You've shamed me. I know Krishna is stubborn, but I can't understand this obduracy which makes one forget one's wife. I'll go and fetch him myself.'

Majhhali Bhabhi absolutely forbade him. 'No,' she said, 'The game is up. My days are numbered. You've been like a father to me, so I want to tell you this— I was not to blame. . . I could have become a mother. Every woman knows what she is and what she is not. Your brother abandoned me taking me for what I am not. . .' and she burst into tears.

She passed away on the fourth day. It fell to me to perform her last rites. When the women of the house were washing the dead body someone whispered in Chhote Chachi's ears, 'Looks like she was three months gone. . .' Chhoti Chachi was paralysed with shock.

Majhhale Rai didn't attend the last rites.

After this incident, it felt as if a stillness had engulfed the whole house. Chhoti Chachi now found herself alone. Rani was now her only companion, that is, when she was not sticking to Arun, which she was most of the time. Everyone understood, but no one said anything. Chhote Rai still had a year to go at college. Bade Rai spent most of the time dispensing law in his courtroom. People were surprised to see him starting to devote so much time to the analysis and investigation of cases. As an Assistant Collector now, he also had to decide revenue cases.

The case before him related to a big zamindar who was alleged to have grabbed the land belonging to a farmer. He had to decide who the rightful owner was— the zamindar or the farmer? The zamindar had produced a number of witnesses who testified that the land was indeed in his possession, and that he had been farming it for ages. The farmer had no witnesses who could say the same for him. Although himself a zamindar, Bade Rai found the zamindar's witnesses quite unconvincing. He found it impossible to believe that an ordinary farmer would file a claim on land belonging to a zamindar. Would a goat dare to graze in a butcher's field?

At first Bade Rai tried reconciliation. He talked to the two parties separately. Next he asked each of them to tell him of some secret mark of identification of the land that was known only to him.

The zamindar parrotted the landowners' usual line :

'You're yourself a zamindar. You know it. What identification mark can a plot of land have? Land is land— same everywhere. The real identification mark is possession— he who has possession is the real owner.'

The farmer said :

'The land is now as good as his. The *patwārī* is with him and so is the *qānūngo*. His piece of paper is the mark of identification, they say.'

Then he continued :

'In the southern corner of the plot there is a stone. My father had got it planted there. Beneath the stone lies buried a pot. My father kept all his savings in that pot and never had to regret it.'

Bade Rai noted down both the statements. After an interval of a few days he rode horseback to the village where the land was located. He made inquiries from the local people about the ownership of the land around the place and, since the villagers didn't suspect his identity, got frank answers. After a few days, he paid another visit to the place, called a few respectable people from the village and got measurements of the land. He then got the earth removed at the spot where the pot was reported to have been buried. Underneath, they discovered a stone, and under the stone, the pot. In the pot sat a snake. It uncoiled with a spring and, before the men could overcome their shock, slithered away into the grass.

'That was his father, huzūr,' the villagers informed Bade Rai, 'He was deeply attached to this land. This was his treasury— where he kept all his valuables. He spent all his days and nights here on this machān and never went home. Died only recently. And now he guards the field in the garb of a snake. The zamindar's men have tried to plough this field repeatedly, but every time they are here, there are snakes everywhere. One ploughman felt there was a snake around his ploughshare, another that it was twined around his legs; still another one was quite positive he saw it climbing up the bullock's tail! So the ploughmen stopped coming altogether.'

The incident left Bade Rai wondering for many days : Was

it possible for a farmer to turn into a snake-protector of his fields after his death? Would the zamindars too haunt their estates as snakes in case the Surājīs were successful in driving the British out? This thought amused him greatly.

The result of all this legwork was that his decision went in favour of the farmer and against the fellow-zamindar. He used two arguments : one, that no farmer could ever muster enough courage to stake a claim to lands belonging to a zamindar, and, two, so intimate was the mark of identification cited by the farmer that only someone with a close familiarity with the land, someone who had actually ploughed and sowed it, could be expected to know it. The zamindar was unable to cite any such mark of identification as could have proved his claim on the land.

At the club a few days later, the Collector, Mr. Dick, joked:

'Mr. Hari Rai, you're a zamindar yourself, and yet you work against the interests of zamindars!'

Bade Rai made a quick rejoinder :

'I try to protect my integrity and your justice, Mr. Dick. If you wish to call it working against the interests of zamindars, you're welcome to it!'

The Collector was silenced.

Bade Rai was worried. For one thing, Majhhale Rai was becoming a source of deep anxiety for him; for another, he had been unable to accept the death of Majhhali Chachi. He couldn't figure out the intentions of Majhhale Rai. Why was he so beastly with his wife? He wanted to talk to Majhhale Rai about it, but what held him back was the thought that Majhhale Rai might either choose to stand fast like a stone wall, or might simply let his tongue loose and to hell with their relations. Chhote Rai was also trying to avoid a meeting with Majhhale Rai. Finally, Bade Rai decided that the two of them together would beard the lion in his den, and seek out his intentions. Chhote Rai hesitatingly suggested that this would be a fruitless undertaking, but Bade Rai overruled the objection :

'I don't want a misunderstanding between us for lack of a dialogue. Krishna didn't consider it proper even to attend the last

rites of his wife. He has disgraced me in the eyes of the whole fraternity. Even the thought of the unborn child, his own flesh and blood, was not sufficient to bring him home. How much they loved each other— Bhaskar's mother even made fun of them, and then this! You can't treat love like a bucket of water that you store at night and throw away in the morning! I can't see what brought on this calamity.'

Now Chhote Rai also felt encouraged to talk.

'He's out of his mind. . . clearly out of his mind. Nothing matters to him any more— neither the honour of the family, nor his own honour. He'd taken bhabhi to an English lady doctor at Meerut. That was the day when he started hating his wife. He wanted her to give him a child who'd carry on his line. He'd concluded that she was incapable of it, and that there was something wrong with her. Tears were Majhhali Bhabhi's only companion in her last years, but she never let anyone suspect the agony that she was passing through.'

'Why wasn't I informed?'

'There was nothing you could've done. I talked to him. He wanted to remarry to prove that the problem was with her. In these circumstances he'd have interpreted any attempt on your part to stop his remarriage as an attempt to make sure that his share of the property reverts to your sons after his death.'

Bade Rai was aghast. He took some time to recover. When he did, he could only splutter :

'Did he say that about me? And the child? What did. . .?'

'No, no,' Chhote Rai tried to switch topics. But, yes, his thinking *had* gone haywire.'

Bade Rai was distressed.

'I sat on the mound like a shepherd and was happy in the thought that my flock was grazing safely. Little did I know that a wolf had laid into the flock. Actually a seed of suspicion in the mind is worse than a wolf in the flock.'

He paused a little, then continued.

'But if he had any suspicion he could've come to me. I'd have told him how incomplete, how blind a man is without a wife.

. . One loses the vision of the eyes within.'

He sat quiet for a while, then suggested :

'It's best that the two of you go to him. Tell him that Bade Bhaiya wants to see him. Also that if he doesn't come now, he might never see me again.' He said nothing about the child, as if the matter never existed. At any rate, was too late to do anything about it.

'Why do you say that?'

'A family is like a building; so is a country, and so is a society. One brick comes loose, and the final collapse is not far away. . . it's only a matter of time.'

Chhote Rai didn't argue the point.

Majhhale Rai was not at home when we arrived at his place. The servants didn't know us and, bag and baggage, we settled down in the open verandah to await his return from work. When he came and saw us sitting outside, he started shouting at the servants. Chhote Rai tried to tell him that they weren't wholly to blame as we hadn't told them anything beyond that we'd come from 'home'. It's, however, well known that the attendants of public officials trust only their masters : in their eyes, everyone else is a liar, including their own when he ceases to be an official. Neverthless, the master's tongue-lashing did produce some effect on the servants. They now looked at us wide-eyed. Then Majhhale Rai turned on us : 'Why didn't you say who you were? I'm disgraced. How can I face Bade Bhaiya now? Imagine my brother and my nephew sitting with attendants and chaprassis!'

Chhote Rai stopped him at this point. 'Let's go in now,' he said. 'We're ready to receive all the welcome you want to give us. But if you continue this sort of reception much longer we'll be in no condition to go home either.'

That amused Majhhale Rai, but he allowed himself the briefest of smiles. We were escorted indoors. His house was in the tehsil office compound. The entire complex was made in the old- style lakhaurī bricks. Wherever the plaster had chipped off, one could see the thin, flat bricks arranged in fine patterns. All the tehsil

attendants were as good as the Tehsildar's private servants. He was a full Tehsildar at the time. While he received their services, he did not have to provide the attendants food. The Tehsildar actually has to look after all the district officials from the lowest to the highest. It was the practice for the officers to send word to the tehsil office whenever they needed anything— man or material. The police station plays a parallel role in the Police Department. Anyway, the house was practically empty and looked haunted. What else could one expect from a house without a housewife? I longed for Majhhale Bhabhi then. I suppose it was on this account that Majhhale Rai was somewhat extra cautious. He looked after us very efficiently and made solicitous inquiries about everyone— about Bade Rai, Chhoti Chachi, Rani, Arun, and the servants in the household. But not a word about Majhhali Chachi. It was self-evident to us that this was not due to oversight, and obviously this fact was also self-evident to him. He arranged us to be entertained in every way lest we should miss the presence of Majhhali Chachi, but could any arrangements fill the void that her death had left in our lives?

In the evening, we were taken on a visit to the bungalow of Joint Sahib. Joint Sahib was a young Indian, freshly returned from England after passing the ICS examination. He came from the same region as we did. Majhhale Rai had told us that he was the son of Khemraj Singh, a close friend of Bade Rai's. Theirs was one of the most distinguished families of the area, known far and wide as the Dudhiyāwāllas. Joint Sahib received us with great warmth and affection, as if we were members of his own family. Officers were then specifically trained to distance themselves from the people— be they chaprassis or close relatives. That tradition has only become stronger in recent years. I was however treated as a family lad. Joint Sahib asked me to be taken to the zenānā quarters with the message that I was the son of the Rai Chāchā of Salempur and was like a younger brother to him. According to custom, we had taken a basket of gifts with us. Majhhale Chacha asked me to take the basket with me and to present it to the Joint Sahiba,

which I did. She duly expressed her displeasure at it.

The Joint Sahiba, popularly called the Jointess, was a woman of great beauty, even more so than Majhhali Chachi had been. I suppose everyone in his childhood has, fixed in his mind, a yardstick, or a touchstone, of beauty, as well of the absence of it. My own touchstone had been Majhhali Chachi. Now the Jointess replaced her. I was gazing at her, transfixed. Noticing my gaze, she smiled at me and I blushed deeply. She presented me two silver coins and laughed as she said :

'You are my devar (brother-in-law), you know.'

The Jointess was aware of the death of Majhhali Chachi. She asked :

'What happened to Tehsildarni Sahiba?'

'She'd been unwell.'

'I heard she died in childbirth.'

I was embarrassed and confused, and said 'Yes.'

'How awful! Losing a wife like that! As if it wasn't bad enough losing the child!'

She paused for a while and then said :

'I heard she was very beautiful.'

My response was to fix her again with my gaze. She smiled and changed the topic.

'Tehsildar Sahib was miserable. Your bhaiya was saying he went without food for many days. He tried to persuade him to go home, but he'd only say : 'What's the use now? Who's there to go home to?' The Jointess was a shade emotional.

I had no comment to make. There was no concord between the scenes that had been following one another before me and what I was hearing. So I kept quiet.

Then she said : 'Chachi— I mean your mother— she isn't living either, is she?'

'No.'

'So who are the ones you have at home now?'

'Chhoti Chachi, my younger sister Rani, and brother Arun.'

'Do you like Chhoti Chachi?'

'Very much.'

'Is she as beautiful?'

I turned my gaze on her again.

'To me, yes,' I said

She laughed, then said :

'Why don't you get married? Then you too will have a beautiful bride. You like beautiful people, don't you?'

I reddened to my ears.

Fruit, nuts, sweets etc. had been laid out in front of me and had also been sent to the menfolk outside. I was still very shy. She continued :

'I'm your bhabhi. . . if you don't eat them yourself I'll put the things in your mouth with my own hands,' and she actually picked up a sweet and forced it into my mouth. To me the sweet was suffused with her fragrance. I took my time eating it. I learnt that day that beauty had fragrance too.

She also put some salties in her own mouth. The pale skin was stretched on her throat with such transparent thinness that I could almost see everything she ate making its way down. I was amazed. I thought of Bhavani. Bhavani was a treasure-house of stories. When he told us one about a princess, he would describe her beauty by saying that one could see water tracing its way down her throat. That was the way I felt now about Jointess Bhabhi. When she noticed my gaze fixed at her throat, she asked : 'What're you looking at?'

I blushed. She laughed. Her name was Damayanti. At one point, Joint Sahib entered the room and called her by this name. It appealed to me. In those days almost every house had a painting by Ravi Varma called 'Nala Damayanti.' It was a lovely painting and, at the mention of the name, I immediately thought of it. Nala, the king, and his queen, Damayanti, had to suffer many misfortunes. Will this Damayanti. . .? I cursed myself at the thought. I was yet to understand why beauty filled one's mind with forebodings about the person who bears it.

I was sent for. They were ready to leave. When I was getting up, she asked me :

'How much longer are you going to be here?'

'I don't know.'

'Do drop in on your bhabhi as long as you are here, won't you? I'm alone all day.'

These words continued to ring in my ears like music long after we'd left their house.

The beauty and the fragrance of the Jointess had entered my soul. Several times that night I woke up to see her standing before me– fresh and fragrant as ever. I remembered Majhhali Chachi looking like that after her bath. I became restless. Her whole being was now diaphanous. Her affection, her fond insistence, her caressing words, her sweet smiles— everything was pellucid and diaphanous.

I wanted to call out to her when I suddenly realized that I was sleeping in the tehsil in my Majhhale Chacha's house. Jointess Bhabhi would be at Joint Sahib's bungalow. Would she also be awake? How must she look sleeping? This restlessness was new to me. Then suddenly the thought occurred to me that my aunts were no less beautiful. But Damayanti Bhabhi had something which they all lacked.

Before retiring that night, Chhote Rai had tried to engage Majhhale Rai in conversation, but Majhhale Rai made some excuse and went out. Chhote Rai tried to get over the awkwardness by trying to engage me instead :

'How did you like the Jointess? What did she ask you?'

'She's nice,' I offered bashfully. 'She was asking about Majhhali Chachi. Told me Majhhale Chacha was broken by the news of her death. Joint Sahib, in fact, told him to go home but he said there was now no one to go home to. She also asked me if Majhhali Chachi was beautiful. Also enquired after Chhoti Chachi and mother.' At the end, I added very hesitantly : 'She also asked if Majhhali Chachi had died in childbirth.'

'How did she know?' Chhote Rai said, perking up suddenly.

I kept quiet.

'What did you say?'

'I thought Majhhale Chacha might have told her.'

He clenched his teeth and muttered to himself : 'How fast can a man hold on to an idea he knows jolly well to be false—only if he can use it to prove his masculinity!'

When Majhhale Rai returned, Chhote Chacha confronted him with the question directly :

'Why didn't you come at bhabhi's death?'

'I'm not obliged to tell you.'

'Yes, you are,' Chhote Chacha raised his voice. 'I must know.'

'I didn't want to see the whore.'

'Whore? What makes her a whore?'

'Whose child was it she was carrying? Bade Bhaiya wrote to me. She was three months gone. I didn't even go near her.'

'Who was it then?'

'Could be anyone. Enough men around there.'

'Aren't you ashamed? You threw her a challenge and now you call her a whore!'

'O.K. So I threw her a challenge. Did she have to take it up? What a faithful wife! I want to know whose child it was.'

'If she hadn't taken it up you'd have gone through life calling yourself a man, without a stain on your conscience. And you would have cursed her. . . because she was childless. A woman can go through her life without a child, but what she cannot and will not put up with is the canard of infertility, We too know our own abilities and disabilities, but do we have the courage to face the reality? How much regard, how much love she gave you— and what did she get in return? A painful, humiliating and harrowing death?'

That was the last time the topic was discussed. For the rest, we enjoyed ourselves. We had feasts and went sight-seeing. Everyday a phaeton was placed at our disposal by one or the other moneybags of the town. The practice was common. In our own home, a phaeton was reserved to cater to the needs of officers. Being officers, they always expected to be provided all these facilities as perks of office. There was no limit on these perks. At our place, officers were even supplied with milch cows. They'd be

sent back when they stopped milking and replacements were immediately provided. Water buffaloes, so common now, were rare then.

The day before we left, Chhote Rai told Majhhale Rai : 'Bade Rai wants to see you and told us to bring you with us.' He didn't mention what Bade Rai had actually said. 'He sent Bhaskar along just in case you didn't feel persuaded by me.'

'No, I can't come now, but I'll come later. Leave Bhaskar here if you like. Will be company for me.'

I was worried that Chhote Rai may leave without me, but he managed the situation rather well.

'Let all of us go back together. When you return, Bhaskar can come with you. Bade Bhaiya is keen to see you, and if you don't come there's no telling what he might do.'

Majhhale Rai was in a fix. He tried various excuses : the Commissioner was expected on a visit; the tehsil complex needed attention, and so on. Then Chhote Rai offered to go and seek Joint Sahib's permission, and Majhhale Rai had to agree to come with us.

Before we left, we called on the Joint Sahib to pay our respects. I was again put up before the Jointess. She offered me a seat next to her and complained how bad I had been not to have visited her again after the first time. Then she got a package readied to be sent with me. It included some clothes. When I was leaving, she kissed me. This was the first time I had been kissed by a woman. Neither of my chachis had ever kissed me. I noticed a glint in her eye when she was kissing me. It was different from the glint that I had seen in the eyes of Kishen Babu, but for a fleeting moment it did strike me, quite mistakenly I'm sure, as if it was Kishen Babu who was peering at me from those eyes.

Emotional encounters were not Bade Rai's style, but that day when he met Majhhale Rai one could see for the first time he was clearly overwhelmed. With great difficulty, he uttered the words :

'Krishna, you could've at least tried to tell me.'

Majhhale Rai stood with his head bowed, at a loss for words.

'With your folly, you killed the only hope of your family. Never, never will you grasp the enormity of what you have done! Two lives, two innocent lives, have been sacrificed to your folly. I didn't know what was going on : since your bhabhi died, I became blind to these things. They would never have happened, had she been alive.'

Majhhale Rai mustered all his strength to say :

'I had nothing to do with the child. He wasn't mine.'

Bade Rai caught hold of his jacket.

'Do you know what you're saying? Do you want to dig the grave of the Rai family while I'm still alive?'

Majhhale Rai did not speak.

'No, no, he was your son; he was the hope of your family. Don't slander your wife. She was innocent; she couldn't but have been innocent. She told me herself. She was dying, but she cried her eyes out and she told me. You know the kind of family she came from. . .' Bade Rai could not carry on. He turned away and went inside. Chhote Rai asked Majhhale Rai too to go to his room.

Bade Rai did not stir out of his room for three days. A storm was raging all round him. He stood in the centre like a tree that had not yet lost its suppleness, with the result that it was being wrenched and pulled and torn apart by the stormy winds. Majhhale Rai was not being able to grasp the pain of this event, the pain of the slow, heart-rending crack with which a mighty tree splits, staggers, and then falls to the ground. If he knew this pain, then he was pretending not to know it, looking deliberately away. Two days later, having decided to leave, Majhhale Rai went to Bade Rai's room. Bade Rai was pacing the floor.

'Bade Bhaiya, I must leave now. The Commissioner is expected on a tour. I must attend to the tehsil.'

Bade Rai did not speak.

Majhhale Rai repeated himself :

'I must leave tomorrow, if I have your permission.'

'As you wish, Majhhale Rai. You're a complete Rai in yourself, the master of your destiny. Only see that the spirit does not break

down; if it does, it breaks you both ways— inside and outside. The same thing happens if you slander another soul and drive it to the edges of life, where a single push plunges it into the abyss below. See that it doesn't happen again.'

'What was my fault, Bade Bhaiya?'

Bade Rai ignored the question and asked :

'I hear you want to get remarried.'

'I wanted to remarry because I wanted a question answered. I already have the answer now.'

'How can Raghav's wife alone look after the affairs of a house as big as this?'

'Looking after family affairs is not enough. There are other demands too.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I may not be able to meet all the demands.'

'What're you saying?'

'What I've seen and suffered.'

'Still . . .

'If I remarry. . .

'Yes?'

He did not continue. Bade Rai also did not pursue.

A few days later news came that Majhhale Rai had got married. It was as if Bade Rai had been hit on the chest by the spell-ridden rod of a shaman— considered then to be the severest hurt one could cause to another. A severe pain shot through his heart. Hurt and sad, he wrote a letter to Majhhale Rai, but he wrote it only when he could bear the pain no longer and felt that he simply had to write it.

He wrote :

Dear Krishna.

I don't know what I would have done if postal mail had not been invented. But then there are many who can't write. They must also be doing something. Perhaps kill or get killed. The train of killings and counter-killings that goes unendingly on— maybe this is what accounts for it.

By doing what you have done you have put a question-mark on my status as the senior Rai of this family. You have wiped off my existence, as children wipe off a figure on their slates at play, or when they become angry. It's not that I objected to your marrying again. I wanted you to marry and, in fact, I told you so too. It's possible you didn't believe me. Who is your new wife, in what circumstances you married her and why— these are things I know nothing about, but since you have married her, try and make her happy. Try and fill every corner of her heart and mind. Often one tragedy saves you from another.

May happiness attend you both. This marriage also makes me conscious of my own duties.

My blessings to both of you!

Your
Hari Rai

Bade Rai wrote the letter in Urdu. Majhhale Rai replied in Hindi, which Bade Rai had difficulty in reading. So he asked me to read it out to him. Majhhale Rai had written :

Respected, fatherly Bade Bhaiya,

No. it's not the way you think it is. Your new sister-in-law is not the same as the old one. The new marriage is also not the same as the old one. That one was for the family, for taking the Rai line forward. We failed to achieve that goal. This one is only for companionship. It is unconstrained by the restrictions of caste and by all those formalities that you must have had to go through for my first. We both know that we can't have children. It is entirely possible that if you knew this, you'd not consent to our marriage. In the circumstances, to have sought your consent would have meant to invite an obligation that we couldn't fulfil. We both know our limits : we couldn't have married if we didn't. It's not that we're happy with our circumstances : we aren't. But that's our destiny. Destiny has always been

for us like a tree which we can use in more ways than one: we use its leaves and we use its bark. And then there's the shade. No matter how weary, you can always use the shade.

I wouldn't write all this to you but for the one sentence in your letter which I couldn't swallow, the one in which you said I'd put a question mark on your status as the senior Rai in the family. On the contrary, I feel I've maintained your dignity by not dragging you into this messy business. I hope you'll pardon my plain speaking in the matter.

Within our limitations, we are as happy as we can be. As soon as opportunity, and an assurance of forgiveness on your part, allows, we'll come personally to seek your blessings. Vir Bahadur, son of Chaudhri Khemraj Singh, is always asking after you. He's our Joint Magistrate. He says as a child he was a regular visitor to our place along with his father. When he was leaving for England for the I.C.S exam, he came to seek your blessings, if you remember the shaven-headed boy with Chaudhri Sahib. After several years of marriage, they are looking forward to having a child. They'd almost lost hope. The Jointess is pleased, but Joint Sahib is tongue-tied. There are rumours galore. If that child had been born, I'd have had to face similar rumours. So it seems it was all to the good, after all.

With apologies,

Yours
Krishna Rai

Bade Rai fretted over this letter for many days. Remarrying was fine if he had to, but why did he have to write all this? I could've sent him to England if he wanted! And who'd fathered the child then? Bade Rai had no peace. Chhote Rai had gauged the cause of his anxiety. One day, Bade Rai asked him : 'Do you know?'

He kept quiet.

'Who was he?'

'Could be anyone— from the music teacher to. . . to me.'

Bade Rai now recalled that the music teacher had done the

disappearing trick. Majhhali Chachi had refused to call him back. The music lessons had stopped suddenly.

'You mean the one who was teaching her to sing?'

'No, I mean anyone. I feel Majhhale Bhaiya is deluding himself. He has lost all confidence in himself. He's a bundle of complexes and these complexes have now led him to start doubting himself. There's no one now he can trust.'

Bade Rai did not speak. Chhote Rai now told him for the first time :

'The English lady doctor who examined Bhabhi at Meerut told him, probably mistakenly, that there was nothing the matter with her and he should have himself examined. Only goes to show a man will stop at nothing if his masculinity is called into question. When a woman's womanhood is impugned, she turns on herself. We too are childless, but surely we can look for new objects of happiness.'

Bade Rai was lost in thought.

After that incident with the gig, Bade Rai cut down on his socialising with the officers, but he inevitably ran into them in those organizations where he happened to be a fellow office- holder. The Zamindari Association was meeting. The Collector was the Ex-officio Chairman, Bade Rai Vice-chairman. The Collector's being a rare appearance, it was the Vice-chairman who looked after the Chairman's duties. Moreover, every Collector put absolute trust on Bade Rai. However, on the particular day, the Collector put in his appearance without prior notice. Bade Rai had just taken the chair when he had to quit it.

A feeling that Dick was not his old self began to trouble Bade Rai and put him out somewhat. The others too shared his feeling of surprise. There had been many Collectors but none had ever dared to ignore Bade Rai as Dick was now doing. Even the devil of a Collector like Darling, despite the distance he always maintained, gave Bade Rai due respect. But Dick had turned his back on him. As soon as he arrived, tea and sancks were served. On being ignored by him at tea, Bade Rai considered leaving the meeting, but that would have only added to the misunderstanding,

so he moved around with others. But since the Collector was present, no one else mattered. Though people talked to him, their eyes kept travelling to the Collector in the hope of catching his gaze. And slowly they were changing their own behaviour towards Bade Rai to bring it in line with the one the Collector was displaying.

Kale Sāīs brought the coach to the front of the building and parked it there. When Bade Rai's eyes fell on it, he came out. He was still undecided whether to go or stay. Kale stepped forward and said :

'Rahmatullah wants to pay his respects, *huzūr.*'

Bade Rai walked down the steps. Rahmatullah had concealed himself around the wall. Now he came out and offered a salute. Then said :

'I beg to be excused for my impertinence, sir.'

'Yes Rahmatullah, what's it?'

'It's about that day, sir. Dinu, brother of Sahib's Jamādār, has been telling tales. He told Sahib that he saw me talking to you. Sahib now suspects that the gig which hit Mem Sahib's coachwas yours, and that I'm involved in the cover-up. Captain Sahib also met you coming out. But I haven't spoken a word, nor will I. I'm likely to be dismissed tomorrow.'

'Meet me at the haveli.'

'No, master, I don't plan to take up a job now.'

'What do you plan to do, then?'

'I can stitch clothes. I plan to set up as a tailor. Work when you want to, loaf around when you don't.'

'Anyway, see me at home. We'll talk at leisure.'

'Yes, sir.'

He turned around and walked off to his coach. The tea was over. Bade Rai paused a little to collect his thoughts, then walked in.'

Where there had always been two chairs there was only one today, so he went and joined the others. This was unprecedented

The agenda was read out first. It was on the table. The first item was the government's appeal to all loyal zamindars to come forward to assist and strengthen the British regime at this time of

crisis when forces of destabilization were becoming active. They must stand together and fight these forces. They must tell their tenants and loyal subjects too to give a fitting reply to the disruptive forces. This motion was approved unanimously. The Collector then congratulated the zamindars on their loyalty and said that by and large the zamindars were loyal to the British crown. But more recently some erstwhile well-wishers of the Crown had been turning away. Such zamindars must think twice before taking any inadvisable steps. Here he stole a look at Bade Rai. 'Ah, I see, they are trying to give a political colour to the incident,' Bade Rai thought instantly, but he kept quiet. The Collector continued :

'We're friends of the zamindars, and we expect frendship from them too. Our existence depends on our interdependence. You are the backbone of the British Empire, but it needs to be made plain that the position you hold today you owe to the British Government. Without naming any names, I wish to issue a clear warning that if you can change your attitude, so can I. When that happens, neither the government nor the people will be with you.'

The next to stand up to speak was the zamindar who had grabbed the farmer's land. Bade Rai's decision had gone against him and he hadn't forgotten it. He started :

'Huzūr, you are the King Emperor's representative. I am a small zamindar. I have served the British Empire to the best of my ability and, if I may say so, my services have compared favourably with those of some of the big zamindars present here today. But I'll never be able to forget the treatment that has been meted out to me. The Vice-chairman of this Association attached greater importance to the claim of a farmer than the actual possession of that land by a zamindar. It has now become difficult for me to enforce my authority and to maintain the prestige of the British Government. The farmers have begun to think no end of themselves. They refuse to work as bonded labour! You send for them and they make excuses! I'd like to know if the office-bearers of this Association are going to compromise on the rights of the members in this fashion. If that land belonged to the farmer, it still belonged to the zamindar. After all, the zamindar

has a proprietary right to everything belonging to his subjects in the same way as the British Government has a proprietary right to everything that belongs to us, the zamindars. And, in any case, I was the one who had possession of the land. There must have been some reason why I had the possession and not him. A slab of stone and a pot were planted in one corner of the plot in collusion with the farmer. A snake was put in the pot. The argument given was that the snake was really the dead father of the farmer, and was guarding the plot of land. But even if you accept the fact that the owner of the plot of land had turned into a snake and was guarding it, how does it prove that the land belonged to him and not to me? Unless of course the prosecutor, the judge and the jury are one and the same person. I appeal to the Chairman of the Association, Sir Collector Sahib Bahadur, to give me justice and to guard against the so-called big people who profess to be well-wishers of the British Empire but who are using their high positions to harm the interests of the loyal zamindars and the British Government.'

Everyone present was aghast. A few were fuming. No one found the venomous outpourings against a respected figure like Bade Rai at all acceptable. But everyone waited for the reaction of the Collector. The Collector asked the zamindar to take his seat and said :

'That was an unfortunate thing. . . I'm aware of it.'

And to everyone things at once fell into place. The whole thing had been staged at a signal from Dick. On his own, that small zamindar couldn't have had the courage to sling mud at the distinguished personality of Hari Rai.

Bade Rai got up slowly and left the hall. Dick was not prepared for this reaction. And as Bade Rai left, the meeting came to an end, since no one was in a mood to speak.

Rahmatullah turned up at the haveli three days later. These three days Bade Rai attended neither the club nor the court. He'd also sent in his resignation from the Vice-chairman's post. The City Magistrate, Mujibul Hasan, had already visited him three times.

Some of the zamindars had also called on him, but Bade Rai had refused to budge. He listened to the City Magistrate with great patience but finally said :

'please tell the Collector that I have nothing against Chandan Singh. He thinks I've violated his rights, but that's because he's claiming rights which never belonged to him. In any case, he could've filed an appeal. But he never had any intention of doing so, nor has he done so.' Mujibul Hasan tried hard to persuade him, but Bade Rai did not yield.

When Rahmatullah came, Bade Rai was sitting in the garden. The moment he saw Rahmatullah, he asked him :

'What have you decided?'

'Master, I now realize how wrong I was to neglect the art that I possessed, and instead to embrace servitude. Any art or skill you possess is your greatest friend, but I didn't even notice the one I had. The fool that I was, I considered myself master of the world when I was no better than a slave. Never a full stomach, and no dignity either!'

Bade Rai looked at him and asked.

'And what does one do who has no art?'

Rahmatullah was taken aback.

'I. . . I. . . don't understand, master!'

'Never mind. Rahmatullah. When one is weaned away from bread and chapati, and is brought up on cake and pudding; when one is taken off one's feet and placed in a coach so that the legs become strangers to walking; when the skin acquires the softness of the silk it always wears, and bleeds at the touch of coarse cloth— if such a person has ever to fall back on chapatis, to walk on his own legs, to use sackcloth to cover himself— Rahmatullah, you never need to pronounce the death sentence on such a person.'

'I'm sorry, master, but that was not what I meant. I was only describing my own condition. If I'd chosen to make my living through my art, today I'd not have had to face the humiliation of being kicked out by Collector Sahib. . . of being called 'untrue to my salt.' I wanted to ask : 'Whose salt? Did you bring this salt with you from England? Don't you eat the salt of this land? Does

this land belong to you?' But I couldn't. Courage failed me. I do beg your forgiveness, master!'

'No, there's nothing to forgive. Take the shop opposite the gate. Tell dīwānjī whatever you need. . . sewing machine and the rest, and he'll get it for you. Start work tomorrow.'

'I have the machine, master. I am the son of a tailor after all. The implements come with the art; when the art languishes, so do the implements. Please do not trouble yourself about the machine. I'd always thought that sitting under the protective shade of a big man, I'd be safe from the burning heat and the beating rain, but there are both in plenty there. No way one can escape. If somehow one saves oneself from being scorched, one is swept off by the flood. I now intend living by my own art and my own labour.'

Bade Rai was deeply troubled by what Rahmatullah had said. He sat thinking for a long time. Was what he said possible? If it is possible, why is it also real for Rahmatullah? There're hundreds of people in the world who, happily bearing the yoke on their shoulders, have their mouths in troughs full of cake and pudding. . . why don't they think and ask like him? As this thought entered his mind, Bade Rai was suddenly afraid of himself. He looked about him : someone might be watching!

The next day the shop was handed over to Rahmatullah. He brought his sewing machine, cleaned and oiled it, said his namāz, and then stitched a skullcap, which he presented to me. Then he stitched two handkerchiefs and presented them to Bade and Chhote Rai.

'I'll forever be in your debt for the kindness you've shown, huzūr,' he said. 'If you could grant another small wish of this humble. . .'

'Sure, Rahmatullah, speak!'

'Kindly fix a rent for these premises I may be able to afford. . . On the Day of Reckoning, I must face Him and He will ask : 'Did you borrow and did you pay back? And answer Him I must.'

A look of annoyance flashed across Bade Rai's face : Who

does this man think he is! Then he happened to look at me and he controlled himself. He said

'Look, Rahmatullah. This shop faces the haveli directly. I never entertained the idea of letting it out because that'd have meant invading the privacy of the haveli. But you are like Bhaskar to me. Can I charge a rent from Bhaskar? Come on, forget it and start work.'

'Master, I can hardly presume to pay rent. What's my worth, after all? Nothing. Give your shoes a shake, and you could bury me in their dust— but my faith says : 'Nothing for free. . . Eat the fruit of thy labour.' I've eaten your salt for so long, and will eat it for years to come. . . but I wish to be able to face my Maker with my head high.'

Bade Rai looked at Dīwānjī and said : 'Fix the rent at one rupee a year and have the deed made.'

Dīwānjī looked up at Bade Rai, but Bade Rai didn't give him an opportunity to speak. He got up and went inside.

Bhavani and Rahmatullah became great friends. They had of course known each other for a long time. When Bhavani arrived, Rahmatullah was about to enter the Collector's service as a sāīs. Rahmatullah also had a great regard for me. Like an elder brother, he always kept a protective eye on me. When he closed the shop in the evening, he would remove his sewing machine to our dīwānkhānā; next morning, when he opened the shop he carried it back again.

Arun was growing up. He hated staying indoors and was always pestering Bhavani to take him out. Whenever he was free, Bhavani obliged him. At other times, Arun would be trailing behind Chhoti Chachi or Rani around the house, whimpering. Bade Rai did not like his staying out too much and had issued standing instructions to this effect. When Rahmatullah arrived, there was some relaxation in this restriction. Rahmatullah would arrange to keep some sweets in a leaf-bowl in a niche in his shop, and whenever Arun turned up at his shop would have it taken down and given to him. He never touched it himself. He was always

mindful of the fact that he was a Muslim, and it would not be correct for him to touch any edibles intended for a Hindu. Often Rani also called upon his services. She had to visit someone and no servants were around, so a maid would go and fetch Rahmatullah, who would escort Rani there and back. But he always kept a distance of two yards from her, his ears and eyes on full alert. He had probably never seen even the small finger of a girl of Rani's age.

Rahmatullah was now more of a friend of the family than a vassal. He'd sacrificed his job for me and for the prestige of my family. He didn't regret the loss of his job the slightest bit. In fact, he was genuinely happy that he'd finally gained an opportunity to practise his art, and treated it as a long-forgotten friend. His income, though, was not much. The charges for stitching a *goldarz kurtā* were one rupee, a pair of pajama trousers four annas : these were actually up from eight annas and two annas respectively. The modern style shirts for men were not yet in vogue, so Rahmatullah's daily earnings rarely exceeded two rupees.

Kishen Babu too left his messages with him, and I could trust him to deliver them to me verbatim. Kishen Babu had hit a bad patch recently. A new and close claimant to the property he had appropriated from Madam Vidya had appeared on the scene. Kishen Babu had no property of his own : all the income he had came from the appropriated property. It paid for everything— for his fun and frolic, for the servants, for administering the property and for the court cases. Whenever his anxieties began to prey on him too much, he would send for me. I also took care not to disappoint him. One day, Kishen Babu became particularly mushy. He blubbered :

'Bhaskar. I'm not fit to tie the shoelaces of the Rais; I'm basically a farmhand. I just can't make out how the Rais manage such a huge property. To me property is like an elephant : you need to keep both under tight control, or they get on top of you. I fear one day this property will crush me like a rogue elephant, and I want to finish it before that happens.'

I stared at him. His eyes were closed and the corners moist.

'Why do you say that?' I asked.

'I say this because it came to me when it had already killed a distant maternal grandmother. I tell you this property is worse than a whore; it never stays with anyone for long. Many big-mouths have claimed to tame it, but it has jilted every single one of them. An funny creature is man— ready to lay down his life for this slut. He won't lay it down for his father, nor for his wife, nor for his children! Now look at me! Aren't I a fool to be killing myself for the love of this property? Aren't I a fool to have given up everything for this whore? How happy I was there at home! Who is here who I can call my own? I understand full well this property is not mine; still I cling to it. But now I think : if go it must, why the hell' don't I get every ounce of fun I can extract out of if before it does? Like the whore it is! Come, join me! You're my friend, my fellow traveller! Collect all you friends too. Let all of us enjoy it! Let us plunder it till it is in tatters. I want to strip this whore naked before the whole world. If it must go, so be it, but it must reckon with me first!'

Kishen Babu was spent. His eyes were closed. In the end he actually did what he threatened to. He lost all discretion and judgement. He carved up his property into pieces and started selling them one by one. Dancing girls and courtesans from near and far were invited to mujrās at his house. Friends came, enjoyed the mujrās and showered compliments. This pleased Kishen Babu so much that he would himself start dancing. I also joined the mujras occasionally and he would shower me with currency notes. The property had finally and truly got on top of him. The more he struggled to wriggle out of its stranglehold, the more it tightened its grip on him. He was doing everything he could to wipe out all the property. He distributed largesse; he drank as much as he could and splashed about the remainder; he bought the costliest dresses and offered them free to poor children, women, and even dancing-girls. But this spending spree didn't last very long. The other party got a stay order from the court on the sale of the property. Now Kishen Babu couldn't sell his property and had to make do with whatever income he had from it. It was as if Kishen Babu

had been winged. There was no money to blow. The wounded bird fluttered, tried to beat its wings, struck the walls of the cage and then collapsed. At first, he borrowed, but no sooner the creditors got wind of the court order they stopped lending to him. A creditor naturally looks at the repaying capacity of the borrower. They not only stopped lending money to him but also started raising the pressure on him for the repayment of the old loans : 'Come on, pay up!'

This news travelled to Bade Rai. The carrier was Rahmatullah. Bade Rai had no particular interest in Kishen Babu; for that matter, not even any general interest. But he somehow considered himself indebted to him. He called me and asked :

'Do you sometimes see Kishen Babu?'

'Yes.'

'How's he?'

'I told him everything. He asked :

'How much do you think he owes?'

I gave him my estimate.

He said :

'Licentious living! Squandermania! All enemies of wealth. All the riches of Qaroon will not last with them around. Money will flow and overflow like a river in flood, and take the banks with it.'

I stared at Bade Rai. I was now at least beginning to make sense of what people said. Bade Rai's own expenses were no less royal. The banks were collapsing here too.

Whenever Bade Rai needed money, he pursued it with a frightening single-mindedness. This was one of the reasons for the disaffection of Majhhale Rai. Chhote Rai, however, had always been considerate about Bade Rai's expenses. Chhote Rai had already passed the Intermediate Examination, the highest level of education in the whole area. Now he had decided to stay at home and to devote himself to the service of Bade Rai and the society, though he wasn't yet quite clear how to go about serving the latter. Bade Rai had a two-thirds share of the property which he could enjoy

as his own. Majhhale Rai had hired a secretary (dīwān) to look after his share of the property. Though he worked under the senior dīwānjī, his only work was to keep the accounts of Majhhale Rai's share of the fief.

Bade Rai seemed to have grasped the meaning of my looks 'What's bothering you?' he asked.

I felt I'd been caught in the act. 'Nothing,' I said. It was my fear speaking.

'I know what you're thinking. 'You have no business to be talking like this'— that's what you're thinking, aren't you?'

I kept quiet. He continued :

'Money spent on licentious living is a waste : you get nothing in return. Money spent on maintaining one's status and honour is money gone too, but, at the end of the day, when everyone has picked up his wares and gone home, and you are left alone to take stock, the light of satisfaction fills your mind that you have not allowed the dignity and the status of the family to suffer, the dignity and the status which our ancestors, through untiring efforts, transformed from a tiny seedling into a mighty oak. This is a debt we owe our ancestors, and whether it's a family, a community, or a country, it's a debt we must all repay.'

Sometimes Bade Rai became very inaccessible. He receded so far back into time that you couldn't espy him any longer. Look into a direction you have never explored, and all you see beyond a short distance is misty darkness. That was the way I felt then.

'Tell Kishen to see me,' he said. 'I don't like him, but one must clear one's debts while one still can, or be prepared to die in the pythonic embrace of their mounting interest.'

That day too it was Rahmatullah who took my message to Kishen Babu. Bhavani could also have been asked, but he was running errands for Bade Rai. Kishen Babu was not at home. It didn't require much imagination for me to guess where he would be at this hour: lying sodden in some joint or attending a mujrā at some kothā (courtesan's place). Ever since the court had clamped down on the sale of property, he had hit upon this novel style of squeezing his property. He had stopped holding mujrās at his house since that

was a costly affair. There were the host's expenses— food and drink had to be served, the 'shower-money' (money to be showered on the singer-dancer) had to be commensurate too, or the madam might come out with some barb ('Why did you jump into the race if you couldn't hold your trousers up?'), and so on. So he started going to the kothās with his friends and hangers-on. He wanted me to join him too, and sometimes pressed me hard, but the fear of the news travelling to Bade Rai kept me on the straight path. I had of course once heard Majhhale Rai mention that Bade Rai too patronized mujrās in his youth, but I never gave too much credence to this report for lack of confirmation. Kishen Babu did on one occasion drag me and Rahmatullah to mujrā. Though I say 'drag', actually we didn't need much dragging. We were all too ready to go.

But I couldn't stay there too long. A very unpleasant smell assaulted my nose. I spent a few minutes trying to figure out what it was. And then I knew. Bade Rai had a sister— a cousin actually— the one whose father had been certified insane. Majhhale Rai often cited him in the context of Bade Rai. She had developed a pustule between her legs. People sitting close to her used to complain of a smell. I was a kid then, and heard people say in whispers that after her husband's death she had started living with some low-caste man and that this was her punishment. That was the sort of smell that filled my nose and, very quietly, I made good my escape. Rahmatullah, however, held his ground. I never found out whether this was in spite of the smell or otherwise. However, that was the end of the kothā for me— I don't think I ever visited one again, and if I did, I'm sure the same smell was also there in attendance. It could be my suspicious mind, but there it always was. Rahmatullah, on the other hand, became a regular companion of Kishen Babu, who had now lost all discretion and judgement. Question like the social status of the people he fraternised with, where to go and with whom, etc. had ceased to bother him altogether. Anyway, I whispered in Rahmatullah's ears : 'You know where he can be found. Go and get hold of him and bring him here. Bade Rai has a mind to do something for him.' I could've said 'Bade Rai is in the mood to. . .'but this word 'mood' hadn't

gained currency by then. As a matter of fact, it came into fashion much later. Now it is on everyone's lips. My sons and grandsons are always having moods. Or, rather, the moods are always having them.

Rahmatullah however argued : 'How'll he face Bade Rai in his condition? He may not even be able to support himself on his feet, or speak a full sentence.'

I knew at once that he was right. So I told him : 'All right then, get him here tomorrow before Bade Rai is finished with his puja. Bade Rai will be in a restful frame of mind then, and he too may not be drunk.'

Then I went and told Bade Rai that Kishen Babu was not at home and had probably gone out in connection with his lawsuit.

'I know,' he said slowly. After a pause, he added : 'You look after yourself. See that you don't land yourself with one of these filthy diseases.'

I was dumbfounded and stood rooted to the spot like a stone.

The incident at the Zamindari Association meeting had divided the zamindars : a few were pleased, but the majority were worried. If this can happen to one like Bade Rai, they thought, we should be prepared for the worst. Dick had behaved in the most indecent manner, and he had done so deliberately with the conscious purpose of humiliating Bade Rai. Nobody could figure out why. What could have come over him? Everyone so far had believed that no Collector could survive in the area without Bade Rai on his side. Now the tables seemed to have been turned.

Of course, Bade Rai knew the reason only too well. Dick had made it out that the carriage to hit his wife's coach was none other than ours. Bade Rai fully realized his error. He shouldn't have returned that evening without admitting everything. The lie he spoke to the SP was another stupid mistake. He could have at least admitted it to him. Things wouldn't be so bad then, but the love for his son had blinded him. The outcome stared him in the face, but he didn't see it! The disgrace into which the stupid boy had landed him gnawed at his heart, but what troubled him even

more was his own lapse. If his reputation had taken a tumble, it was because of his own fault. People who had always thought him to be pure like water in a sparkling silver bowl, and unshakable like a rock in his integrity, now thought differently. Englishmen are after all a class apart— the rulers! The rest cannot stand comparison with them— be they zamindars, jagirdars or plain farmers. In the final analysis, all of them are subjects. None of us has any right to overstep the limits and then refuse to take the consequences.

In the end, Bade Rai decided to take Captain Wood into confidence and make a clean breast of it to him. He might be able to play the mediator and sort things out between him and Dick. That seemed to be the only way the situation could be saved now. After all, we are where we are today because they have put us there. If they decide to pull the rug from under our feet now, can we be surprised if we fall? Ours is a reflected glory. There are those who battle the British and are still held in regard. They draw their glory from their battle. There are ways and ways of winning glory and of dispensing it. Everybody takes their choice and pays their way. If there's one who needs to make no choice, or is all paid for— it's no human being. He also knew that by opting out of his evening visits to the club he had exiled himself from his society, and his heart was sometimes filled with despondency. Like some furry animal who'd drenched itself, he wanted to shake himself free of the weight of despondency and be his old and light self again. Sometimes he felt he could do it; at other times he decided that it was not in him : only those who had a spark of rebellion in them were capable of doing it. Aeons ago, his ancestors had stamped that spark out of him.

Many days were lost to indecision. As soon as one question was answered another one arose and struck down the answer. Then one day his mind was made up. He ordered the coach. He got into the coach, slightly unsteady on his feet. But he didn't buckle, and drove straight to the Collector's bungalow. This was his first visit after that night. At the bungalow, a mighty tree was being cut down with axes. A slight shiver of fear ran through Bade Rai's body.

Such a lush green tree, being axed so mercilessly. He didn't like it. It must have been nurtured through ages. Who knows by whom? Amid what difficulties? Who knows how many had sheltered themselves under its shady branches? He wanted to turn back. The thwack, thwack of the axes against the living trunk of the tree was blasting his ears. His head, you could say. But Mrs Dick stood right in front of him in the verandah, perhaps supervising the felling of the tree. Mr. Dick was in the office, attending court. Collectors had judicial powers too then. Bade Rai bade good morning. In response, Mrs Dick raised her eyebrows. The contempt in those raised eyebrows filled Bade Rai's mind— the contempt of a woman at that! There was a time when Mrs Dick was a personal friend! And the relationship had even invited comments from people.

Mrs. Dick said :

Well, well, Mr. Hari Rai, you seem to have forgotten that it's a court day for Dick.'

'No, Mrs. Dick. I didn't forget. One doesn't forget such things about one's superior officer.'

Mrs. Dick turned her eyes on him and he quickly changed the topic.

'Why are you having it felled? Old trees give so much shade.'

'Its shadow has grown too big. Invades our courtyard.'

'Have the leaves trimmed.'

'No use. Will grow up again. Too big for its own good. Anything that grows too big is best cut down. You should know. . . a big zamindar like you.'

'Why talk of my zamindari when you rule the whole country?' Bade Rai smiled.

Mrs. Dick wanted to say something but stopped short. It was Bade Rai who spoke next :

'I've come to seek your forgiveness. I also came that evening when another coach hit yours. The jamādār said Sahib wanted me to come the next day, so I went back. I only want to explain that it was my son who was driving the gig when the horse went out

of control. It couldn't be reined in, and as soon as it turned it hit your coach. I'm deeply pained and ashamed that it happened. It has been weighing on my mind. I feel light, having unburdened myself. I'm in your hands now. You're free to take whatever action you choose.'

'But. . .'

'I've told you everything. Why and how it happened, I'm unable to say. All that I can say is that whatever happened was extremely unfortunate. Each injury, each cut you received sent waves of pain through every part of my body. . . pain that is too hard to cure. If it were bodily pain, perhaps it would go away someday, but when the pain is inside you, it's hard to get rid of. The wound you received is embedded inside me permanently, and it hurts. . . it hurts me day and night. That was all I came to say.'

She was speechless for a moment. Bade Rai took a few steps towards the gate. The strike of the axes against the tree-trunk had suddenly become soundless. He could hear nothing. Then Mrs. Dick's words came floating in the air :

'Please sit down.'

'The days when I could sit here and feel the warmth of your friendship are over for me. After all that has happened, how can I sit here and look you in the face?'

'Please do sit, Rai Sahib. Actually Dick is mad, very mad. He threw Rahmatullah out. Whatever happened at the Zamindari Association meeting is also known to me. He thinks you are being influenced by nationalists. But tell me,' she paused a little, 'Would you have admitted your fault, if all this had not happened?'

'Most certainly. But maybe after a few days. The time— I would decide. Whatever happened at the Zamindari Association meeting only helped to advance that time. I had planned to present a compensation when I came to admit my mistake. Mr. Dick is right to be angry. But he hit the other extreme. I didn't expect that. I feel an officer should never hit the extreme. Nevertheless, he did it, and he was right to do it. . . he could've done more, much more, if he'd so wanted.'

Mrs. Dick strained every nerve to get the innermost meaning

of what Bade Rai wanted to say. A few moment passed, then she said :

'I believe what you say.'

Bade Rai was quiet. He spoke again after a lapse of time :

'Please do not think I'm here to pressurize you, or to put forward excuses. I'm here only because I have been deeply troubled by the grave wrong done to you that day. I came because I wanted to be relieved of that troubled feeling. Not that I have any hesitation in seeking the forgiveness of an estimable person like you. I've indeed come to discharge that duty.'

'Don't say that, Rai Sahib.'

'I must take your leave, Mrs. Dick. Please allow me.'

He stood up. So did she, and walked a few steps with him.

The sounds of the axes suddenly reached a feverish pitch. Bade Rai found it difficult to stay.

'I'll talk to Dick,' she said.

Bade Rai cast a glance towards the tree, then quickly got into the coach.

Whether or not Mrs. Dick talked to Mr. Dick, and, if she did, whether or not it had any effect on him are issues on which one can only speculate. But a strange thing did happen. Safed, the horse which pulled the gig on the eventful day, was known to be the tallest horse in the district. Riding Safed was an experience : the rider never felt he was on a horse; it was more like as if he was mounted on a medium-sized mound, which floated in the air. Of course, we know that mounds never float. The horse was the glory of the town, not just our haveli. He always figured in the list of the specialities the town had to offer. After that incident, he was sent out of town and into the zamindari on Rahmatullah's advice. Even I found myself being drawn to Safed. Every evening the horses were brought into the haveli for their feed. Fodder-bags were attached to their mouths. Inside the bags their mouths worked like the mouths of calves suckling at the teats. The little bells around their necks tinkled. It was Safed who always led the team. He hated being led. If for some reason he sometimes lagged behind, he would

immediately make his way to the front one way or another. Another thing about him was that he would not be escorted by any one except the sāīs. It was idle to expect that, for example, he would let himself be led by the charkatā. He would kick and rear and refused to feed. When the team arrived, he would be the first to hinny : the others followed suit one after another. All the while I would watch him transfixed. Whenever Bade Rai was at home, the feed was supervised by him. After the fodder bags had been fixed, Bade Rai would walk from horse to horse stroking their necks. Animals can read the language of touch better than we can read words. Sometimes it so happened that Bade Rai passed Safed by and stood near some other horse at the start of his round. This was unacceptable to Safed. He would start throwing his neck and stamping his feet, and would not subside till Bade Rai came and stroked him. When he was exiled, all of us were of course very sad, but the horses too had lost their spirit. They trooped in for their feed with the ears dangling, and flapped them only when Bade Rai passed his hands over them. The ears of a horse prick up only in battle, or when riding; at other times, for example, when feeling affectionate, or a bit cowed down by the coachman's rebuke, he lets them hang.'

Safed's absence, apart from telling on all of us, had taken the life out of the feeding times. The horses, chomping their fodder in a row, looked a despirited lot. Then one night it so happened that Safed was at the gates of the haveli after having run cross-country for twenty-five or thirty miles. The gates of the haveli were pushed shut every night like the portals of a fortress. The haveli was in fact built like a fortress— strong and solid. He kept pushing the solid doors with his haunches till they were scraped and bloodied. Every now and then he would stand on his hindlegs and try to pry open the doors with his front legs. But there was no play in the doors at all. When morning came, and he heard the doors being opened, he started stomping impatiently, almost prancing like a colt. In those days, doors were fastened on the inside with thick and heavy rods. You shut the doors and slipped the rod in. In fact, these rods were topics of smutty jokes specially in

the context of love-torn women whose lovers or husbands were away. It took two men to slip the rod in, or to pull it out. Safed knew that the door was about to open when he heard the rod being moved. The moment the door opened he reared and whinnied like crazy. The two men who had opened the door were thrown back and one of them in fact took a tumble and rolled on the ground. Safed galloped in and pulled up only when he had reached the food-troughs. That was a good distance from the gates, but he took no time at all : it seemed as if he had landed there in a single jump. Once in the courtyard, he again started stamping his feet. Bade Rai was still asleep in his room, which was straight ahead. He woke up with a start. As he looked out, his heart missed a beat : What on earth is Safed doing here?

He came out at once. The moment Safed saw him he was beside himself with excitement and watered on the spot. He looked thoroughly unkempt. The body was splattered with mud, and the mane had not been pulled and shortened. Standing on the raised platform, Bade Rai passed his hand over the mane and stroked his neck. Safed lifted his front legs onto the platform. Bade Rai stroked his knees. Safed then withdrew his legs from the platform, as if the touch had revived them.

Bade Rai asked : 'How did you get here all by yourself, son? Did anyone come with you?'

The tears from Safed's eyes formed into two streams. Bade Rai called out to Bhavani. Bhavani used to be up at around four o'clock and went into the fields to answer the call of nature. That was when the gates opened. Bhavani was usually back by five. That day he was still in the house. On hearing the call he came running. The sight of Safed brought him up short.

'Soak his feed,' said Bade Rai. 'Must be quite hungry. God knows how long he has been running. . . And despatch a runner to the camp. Inform them that he's here, safe and sound. They'll be worried. And tell Kale to take him and give him a thorough wash and a good massage. Isn't he filthy. . . like a beast?' and he laughed in affection as if talking to his own son.

There was leftover gram from the previous night's feed.

Bhavani brought it in a fodder-bag. Bade Rai took the bag and personally put it on his mouth. As their eyes met, Bade Rai saw something in his eyes which made his own eyes moist with tears.

In the meantime the news of Safed's return had spread throughout the haveli. The women were at the latticed windows trying to catch a glimpse of him.

I had come down too. Ever since mother died, Bade Rai had moved his bedroom to the groundfloor and I had moved into my mother's room. Majhhali Chachi's room had been locked. So long as Chhote Rai was in college, Rani and Arun slept with Chachi in her room. When Chhote Rai came back after finishing college, the children moved into an adjoining room where the maid, Imarti, slept with them. Arun often woke up in the middle of the night and caused a lot of commotion. It took two persons to bring him under control. He had woken up now and followed Rani to the doorstep. Rani, though still quite young, had outgrown the days when she used to hop, step and jump into the courtyard out of the blue. With age, children seem to develop a sense of appropriate behaviour, specially girls. Even the servants of the house took the liberty of asking her to stay indoors; Kale and Rahmatullah could even give her a scolding. She stood there at the doorstep looking wistfully at Safed and wanting to stroke him, but didn't dare to step out.

Chhote Rai had also appeared on the scene. He called out to Rani : 'Come on out, Rani. Look! Safed has come such a long way all alone and you're afraid even to cross the doorstep!'

Rani looked at Bade Rai, but he didn't speak; he always avoided contradicting Chhote Rai. So Rani crossed the doorstep. As soon as Safed saw her, he started stamping his feet again. He hadn't forgotten the days when on every visit to the haveli, Rani offered him something or the other to eat with her own hands. In the beginning, she was scared, but Kale had got her to feed sweets to all the horses on her palms, and she was now friendly with all of them.

Safed had me thinking. Bade Rai's expression was also turning from affectionate to stricken. He spoke to Kale :

'This isn't right, his coming here all by himself, his stamping

the feet, shaking. . . Once he gets into the habit of shaking and shivering in the stall, it's bad for the master and it's bad for the stalls. Look after him and bear this in mind. And see that he never comes out.'

Kale took him to the stables. Bade Rai was stricken with foreboding.

When Rahmatullah got to know of it, he blurted out unwittingly : 'This is bad. . . very bad.' He was the first one Bade Rai sent for, and he repeated the same to him : 'This doesn't portend well, master! Safed can be picked out in a million.'

'H'm,' said Bade Rai and added after a pause : 'I've told Mrs. Dick everything.'

Rahmatullah was taken aback, but he kept quiet.

'I should have revealed everything that very day. . . you lost your job because of me. We are a selfish lot.'

'No master, I'm doing fine. One's always better off carrying one's own head-load rather than serving another. Even if you spill, no one can complain.'

'You'd have been entitled to a pension in the Collector's service, and if the Collector was happy, many other benefits besides. Look at Rai Bahadur Ghamandi Lal. He was Mr. Wilson's driver, Mr. Wilson, the forest contractor. When Wilson left India, he left all his business to Ghamandi Lal. Said : 'Ghamandi Lal, you have served me well. I now leave all my contracts to you. Look after them well. We're going. My wife's homesick. You'll send us ten thousand a year. Agreed?' 'But, sir,' said Ghamandi Lal, 'Ten thousand is too much.' 'All right, eight thousand, then,' Wilson said. Eight thousand then means fifty thousand now. And Ghamandi Lal never looked back. Made millions during the war. God alone knows whether he ever sent the eight thousand to Wilson or not!'

'No master, money doesn't count. What counts is contentment and the peace of mind. Please pray to God that I may get those.'

Bade Rai was impressed, but he changed the topic.

'What do you think we should do about Safed?'

'Send him back, master!'

Bade Rai closed his eyes for a moment.

'Rahmatullah, I can't force him into exile again just because he can't put his feelings in words. Can I behave that way with my children? He walked a whole night alone to be with me! You know very well, Rahmatullah, horses of this breed are like your own children to you if they love you, but won't let you touch them if they don't. They can't bear to be separated from their masters : you change the masters and they'll shed tears of blood. They'll not stand deceit. No, Rahmatullah, come what may, I'll not banish him again.'

Rahmatullah could say nothing after this. He could read in Bade Rai's face his extreme concern for Safed. There had so far been no gesture of reconciliation from Dick's side. He could go to any extent to avenge himself. Bade Rai had of course met and talked to the SP, but he too had made no mention of Dick's intentions in the matter. In short, it was *status quo ante.*

Kishen Babu had lost two major cases of the seven or eight he had been fighting. The second case was a really big one. A large chunk of property slipped out of his control when he lost this case. Now he was left with the house and some property in the city. In the meantime he had acquired an addiction to cocaine. He took it in his pān. There was only one pān-seller who sold cocaine-treated pān— Ramo. A single flick of cocaine in the pān was enough to send the customer on a trip. The tongue stiffened and the eyes swam. He would lie down quietly and enjoy himself. It prolongs the sexual act, he used to say. A cocaine pān cost five rupees then. When the price went up later, he couldn't afford if any more and switched to opium. He took a quarter dose everyday. The day he had to miss it, stomach cramps seized him and he would be writhing and flailing in pain. Only his regular dose could calm him then.

His visits to the kothās had also ceased. There was no money. People weren't the same anymore. Drunken bouts were falling off. Poverty was evident everywhere. The walls around him wore depression like moss. I tried to explain to him again and again that

he had to come out of this depression and start doing something, or it would be curtains for him. Who was going to look after the two kids at home, waiting open-mouthed like chicks to be fed? He had a wife and two kids— a son and a daughter— at home, a fact which he rarely revealed, but had revealed to me in a moment of weakness. He used to send them some money every month. Tne amount got smaller and smaller till it ceased altogether. He was saddened by this, and was sometimes very contrite about it : 'God alone knows how they are surviving. . . none of their fault, poor devils.'

Once I asked him to give me their address, but he didn't.

Sometimes he now got fits— wailing and lamenting. During one such fit, he told me : I don't know, Bhaskar, why I sit, coiled like a snake, guarding this property. It didn't spare anyone in the family of that woman : will it spare me? More cunning than a whore, this property. Who knows how many she's slept with? Coins can be melted down, whores die, but this property— she goes on and on, from one man to another, never stopping. The boundaries may well change, but nothing else does. We call her our own, we're ready to lay down our lives for her, which we wouldn't do for our own wives and daughters! I think I have had all that I had to have— now let the others have what they have to have. What am I doing holding on to it?

One day I brought up the matter of his family in a similar context. 'Let's send for them and get them over,' I said.

'Whatever for? One day it's I who must go there. I went to Bombay once. There I saw the sea— how large is the sea! The ships on the horizon look like beetles, so small! Then they come into the harbour and how big they are! You see them stop in the harbour; you hear the whistle, you see people disembarking, and you feel how impatient the ship must feel to reach the harbour,how light it must feel to see everyone getting off it. The sailors too look so happy— as if they've got the world! It doesn't matter to them if the ship sometimes returns with all its holds empty— they at least have a harbour to return to; there the people are their own people; there each of them has some land, maybe only a few bighas, but the supreme happiness is the homecoming— the homecoming

of a sailor. Only one who's stayed afar knows what that happiness is.'

These days, when Kishen Babu talked, the air filled with tension, and a heaviness descended on the scene which made it difficult for me to carry on. I always struggled to find a way of easing the tension.

He continued : 'I had really nothing to do with that woman. Someone in her family had adopted my father. When she was looking around for a successor to inherit her property, someone must have mentioned his name too, and she included one more name in the list : if the property does not settle on X, Y, or Z, it may be inherited by Dalip Chand or his heir. It seems they couldn't find any X,Y, or Z, and once again someone said 'Why not Kishen Sahai, son of Dalip Chand?' And the lawyer came and caught hold of me. . .me! An irrtrievable country yokel! My first reaction was to refuse, to run away, but my wife, my kids. . . 'What a fool!' they said, 'What a fool! He's getting such a huge property for free and he's thinking :' 'Shall I take it or shall I leave it! What a fool!' Women, you know, are more practical in these matters and my wife, more quick-witted than most, lost no time in grabbing the property and thrusting it on me. And what did that poor woman get out of it? I had all the fun! This wretch, this luckless wretch, who has landed from nowhere today, where was he then? Why didn't he materialize then? That would've saved me from this fire, this hell-fire that burns me today. Of course, if I had any sense, I'd have made my fortune by now, but the fool that I was, I busied myself taking it apart bit by bit; I had no time to put together anything. After all, this property too, like us, must think, mustn't it, God help me, where did this wastrel of a fellow get on to my tail? Shake him off! Get rid of him! Drunk! Junkie! Profligate! That's how I was lost to my family. One day my wife landed here, with the two kids; I sent her packing back to the village posthaste. 'What the hell do you think you are going to do here?' I said. As if I was soing a hell of a lot here! God knows, Bhaskar, we, the little upstarts, we get a little something and first thing we do is to kick our own

people. What a funny thing! She came here and I kicked her out. Now if I go back she'll lay our the red carpet for me! she'll have a celebration! She'll dance for joy because her good-for-nothing, wastrel of a husband has returned to her, having lost even the shirt on his back!' He burst into laughter. I felt I'd burst into tears.

He kept up an incessnat chatter. Then all of a sudden he probably realized he had been talking too much. Instantly, he took out a cocaine pān and put it into his mouth. In a few seconds his tongue was stiff. He had been wallowing in his misery; now he was drowning in cocaine-induced ecstasy. He was crying— was it out of pain, or ecstasy? As I rose to leave, he looked at me with eyes which said 'Stay! Don't leave yet!', but I had to leave. The pressure of work on me was rising— to be exact : was being raised, so that, like a horse being broken in,I should learn quickly to trot in step.

I got up. I was only wondering : If think he must go what is he waiting for?

It was still night when the chain of the big haveli gates ratled noisily and insistently. Normally, anyone seeking entrance would rattle the chain once or twice and wait for a response. But this caller wasn't waiting for a response at all; he seemed to be in the greatest hurry. There was a time when a gong sounded the hour at the haveli. That practice had stopped long ago. Gongs are sounded only in places where there is a treasury. In earlier days, the cash receipts of the zamindari were stocked at the haveli itself. Later, as parts of the zamindari were sold off one after another, the income had declined. At the time, the revenue was around fifteen lakhs. Things were cheap. Gold sold at twenty to twenty two rupees (per tola = about ten grammes) and wheat was three dhārīs (15 seers, or slightly less than 15 Kg.) for a rupee. Apart from the fall in income, a bank had also opened nearby. The bank was owned by our own relatives, so there was not much risk of losing money in a bank failure. We would be forewarned in that eventuality, and could withdraw the money in time. But I was talking about gongs. The gong was sounded for sometime even after the treasury had moved out, but the practice died out with time.

The gates were opened. Kale sāīs stood there in a dazed condition. He was finding it difficult to speak and yet was stammering something. Bade and Chhote Rai too had come out of their rooms and were standing on the platform. Chhote Rai had been sleeping in Bade Rai's room as Bade Rai hadn't been feeling well. He had had an attack of renal pain earlier in the evening.

'What's the matter, Kale? Anything wrong?' Bade Rai asked as soon as he set eyes on him.

'Sa. . .Sa. . . Sa. ..,' he was quite unable to speak. Chhote Rai put a reassuring hand on his back and said : 'Come on. Don't worry. Take it easy. Speak! Tell us what it is.'

Kale went on blabbering for a while as if he was choking. After Chhote Rai had used a lot of reassurance, he was barely able to say 'Huzūr, Safed is not in his stall,' and burst out crying. Both laughter and tears in those days were the real thing.

Bade Rai let out a scream : 'What the hell were all of you doing?'

Kale choked. He panted and wheezed. His breath went like a bellows and it seemed it was about to give out. Chhote Rai continued to reassure him : 'Come on, come on, speak up! If you don't speak, how'll we ever know?'

Amidst convulsive sobs, Kale said : 'The stable door has been broken down. The front and rear chains have all been cut.'

The feudal master in Bade Rai was suddenly fully awake. In his priorities now, men like Kale had no existence, or existed at the very bottom of the scale. He lifted his cane. Chhote Rai at once intervened. Kale stood with folded hands.

Bade Rai didn't proceed, but his voice was like a whip : 'If my Safed comes to any harm, I'll have all of you lined up and shot!'

Bade Rai had overreached himself : I'll have you skinned alive,' would have been more realistic.

Chhote Rai managed to put in edgeways :

'Let's hear him out, Bade Bhaiya.'

'How did the doors open?' The words of Bade Rai came hurtling down to where he stood.

'The bolt had been forced,' he sobbed.

'Did you make any inquiries in the neighbourhood?'

'Who was there to answer the inquiries in the middle of the night? There was only that half-mad woman. She was screaming 'Policemen riding Rai's horse!' When I asked her, she let loose a string of abuses at me : 'Your Rai has policemen on his horse and a string-cot on his head. .. you fool!'

Bade Rai of course knew better that trusting a half-witted woman. But he smelled a rat. This smacked of an official agency at work. He asked the coach to be brought around at once.

Chhote Rai said : 'Bade Bhaiya, if an official agency is behind this, what do you think you can do? Power is dehumanizing— it not only punishes the law-breakers, it can also settle scores with those who displease it. Of course, a frontal challenge would be a different thing. You've been groaning with pain all night. If this is a theft, inquiries can only start in the morning. If it's an official job, no inquiry will ever reveal anything.

'You don't know, Raghav. I can bear that pain, but this pain is unbearable. I am no Ram, but I can now understand how he must have felt when his ashwamedha horse was captured; worse, how he must have felt when he failed to win it back. He was lucky that they were his own sons who'd taken his horse, but me? My horse was taken because it's my honour that rides with the horse.'

Chhote Rai gestured to Kale that he should go away, but he kept standing, his eyes fixed on Bade Rai. Only when Bade Rai left the spot did he turn to go.

Bade Rai got worse, but he wanted Chhote Rai to go and meet the Police Captain.'Don't worry about me. go and meet the Police Captain. Tell him everything. Ask him if the British Government has decided not to rest content till our honour has been fully and irretrievably trampled into dust.'

Already people had been dispatched in different directions to look for Safed. The only clue that had so far been uncovered was that he was being kept in hiding somewhere in the town itself. Rahmatullah didn't open his mouth, but was profoundly upset and

was conducting his own search. Bade Rai was impatient to leave the bed but was in no condition to do so. Chhote Rai and myself were keeping up a hectic pace. The visit of the Police Captain proved totally unrewarding. He gave us a very patient hearing, but finally fobbed us off with the promise to institute a search and punish the guilty. Officers are still the same today. Sometimes they know, sometimes they don't, but what they say is always the same. The report was recorded with exemplary promptness, but action was nil. People were astonished that a horse belonging to one of the biggest zamindars and a pillar of the British rule in India had been snatched, yet no one stirred.

The whole family was living in breathless suspense. It was as if a child of the family had been kidnapped. The sāīses felt disgraced as a class. Fear, like a sword of Damocles, dangled over their heads and could mean their death any moment. One by one, all the sāīses had offered their explanations and alibis to Chhote Rai or to me. There wasn't much else they could've done anyway. I didn't feel very sympathetic to them, since I believed that, with a little more alertness on their part, the tragedy could've been averted. Chhote Rai was more in tune with their point of view : 'We wouldn't be sorrier if our own son had been snatched! We've eaten your salt and may that salt suppurate like molten lead from each pore of our bodies if we have the slightest hand in Safed's disappearance! May we and our children pick at the suppurating pus with our eyelids. . .!' They had their own language of testimony.

Both of us were trying hard to console them. Kale, now totally immune to reassurance, had been cursing himself constantly : 'Your ancestors,' he told himself, 'served this family for hundreds of years and you dragged its name through mud! There's not a drop of blood in your body, you wretch, which is not awash with the salt of this family, the water of its wells and the air of these environs! When the day of reckoning comes and your ancestors put you in the dock, what answer will you have? They'll tell you that you have betrayed the line, and they'll lay on you the curse : 'No man in your line will ever be privileged to hold the reins of a horse again; that art, the art of horsemanship, will be lost to your sons

and your grandsons and all their descendants forever, and you'll go begging from door to door, and you'll get no alms!'

He wasn't far wrong. Haven't we seen that art disappear from our lives?

Bade Rai could neither eat nor sleep. He would lie in his bed, tossing and turning. At the slightest noise, he would push himself up and gaze expectantly at the visitor. Possibly, there was news of Safed. Possibly, he had come to say that they had found Safed. Though now ten, Safed still retained the stamina and the magic of his youth. Bade Rai had undertaken prolonged expeditions solely because he could trust Safed. And now he was gone. Where was he? The entire fief had been scoured without any success. That had put to rest all speculation that he might have taken off on an impulse and returned to his earlier station in the zamindari. Every now and then, the thought also crossed his mind that. . . but he pushed that thought away. He dared not entertain it. It made him feel helpless, like a man being stripped of everything by a bully. If he was mad at me, he could have taken it out on me, he thought. Why pick on the defenceless animal? There was no satisfactory answer to his query that he could think of, nor was any answer forthcoming from the world outside.

It was the third day after Safed's disappearance. A police constable from the Kotwālī (Police Headquarters) arrived at the haveli first thing in the morning. Bade Rai was feeling better. Rahmatullah had told him last night that Safed was in the Collector's stables. Bade Rai was sitting on the platform, shaving. His shaving habits were considered thoroughly British. On certain occasions, he was known to shave twice a day— thereby establishing a record of sorts. The regular morning shave was followed by another one if he had to attend a party at the club in honour of a ranking officer. The barber's services were used only for haircuts and body massage.

The constable offered a stiff salute. Bade Rai took offence at his walking straight up to him, but he didn't say anything. He addressed himself to Bhavani, who stood close by :

'Ask him what he wants. Who has sent him?'

'Bhavani turned to the constable and was about to mouth

the question, when the constable offered on his own :

'I've been sent by Kotwal Sahib. I've instructions to give the message only to you.'

Bade Rai now looked at him. 'Go ahead,' he said.

The constable looked at Bhavani.

'Go ahead,' said Bade Rai, 'Bhavani's my confidant.'

'Huzūr, I'm also a confidant of Kotwāl Sahib and he specially warned me to confide the message to you alone.'

Bade Rai signalled Bhavani to leave, but he was fuming inwardly. If the message was so special, why did he send a constable? Outwardly, he said : 'Come on, hurry up. What's it?'

'Huzūr, Kotwāl Sahib has asked me to tell you that when on his beat this morning he saw the dead body of a horse near Khooni Baag. . .'

'Dead body. .. horse. . . near Khooni Baag,' he muttered. 'O.K. You can go,' he told the constable.

As he turned to go, the constable halted briefly and said :

'Kotwal Sahib has said his name should be kept out of it.'

Bade Rai gave a nod and closed his eyes. Pain, like spilt ink, darkened his face.

'So he stuck to his guns,' he muttered to himself, his razor hand hanging in the air and his face half-lathered. He sent for Chhote Rai, who hurried through his toilet and presented himself at once.

'Take the coach and drive to Khooni Baag straightaway.' The lump in his throat made speech difficult. 'The dead body of a horse is lying there. . . still fresh. . . can't be any other. .. I'd heard many tales of British justice and fairplay. .. one more tale for the lore. They knew they couldn't touch Rai, so they took it out on the defenceless animal.'

'It could be some other horse. . .' Chhote Rai tried to console him.

'None other. . . if one has to seek out the dark solitude of Khooni Baag to commit the deed, it can only be Hari Rai's Safed, none other. And when Kotwāl Sahib himself sends the message... ?' He was now speaking more to himself. 'Isn't that significant? For

all you know, it may be the same man who first kills and then calls you to the spot.'

He got up and walked away to the bathroom, still half-shaven.

Khooni Baag was about a furlong further down the road from the Collector's bungalow, at the other end of the town. The spot was shaped like a bowl with a deep centre where grew a thickness of tall, sturdy trees. From the road one could see clumps of bushy foliage standing erect like nature's soldiers, but the stems were lost in the depths. Hundreds of trees of different varieties— mango, pīpal, kīkar, banyan, jānd, arjun, august, ban jalebi— crowded the area. In the 1857 revolt, hundreds of patriots were either hanged from the trees or shot against them. Many trees still bore the bullet marks, or at least that's what many people thought. They would stand under the trees, pointing upwards : 'There. .. there. .. up there. . . don't you see. . . there's a mark!' Someone would agree promptly, others would be unable to see and kept pestering : 'Where? Where? I can't see at all.' Such people had to be finally put down with 'Look, if you don't want to see it, you'll never be able to see it.' People said bodies of patriotic fighters dangled from the trees like pods of amalatāsa. Bade Rai must have been still a kid then. Terror was let loose on the city. People were in panic. The word 'Britisher' was enough to send people scurrying like sheep. One of the patriotic fighters was a woman, possibly a whore. She had raised the banner of revolt and had collected a large following. People argued that only a woman who had transcended the bounds of womanhood could do what she'd done : it could only be a *satī*, or a whore. The order servants used to whisper stories of the times of Bade Rai's grandfather. He had given shelter to two or three British families during the revolt. A member of one of those families had later returned as the Governor of the province and had bestowed several villages on the grandfather. The magistracy had been in the family since then, even if the incumbent was an illiterate. No wonder, congressman had, on more than one occasion, shouted slogans against Bade Rai.

Khooni Baag was now supposed to be the favourite haunt

of ghosts. It was said that on a nightly visit one could see droves of dead bodies hanging from the trees— debating, laughing, singing and hailing Mother India. But if they saw you, they vanished into thin air. It was also said that they often wept when they saw what their country had come to!

We were getting ready to leave : Chhote Rai had asked me to accompany him. As soon as we made to leave, we saw Bade Rai coming down to join us. Chhote Rai tried to stop him but he said :

'All his life he carried me on his back, and I couldn't be there even at his death. Let me at least pay a call now.' It was all we could do to hold back our tears.

So all the three of us went. Kale kept wiping off his tears as he drove the coach. Time and again, our eyes filled up and the lights began to dazzle. There was a lot of dust too. The street cleaners were already at work sweeping the roads. They were paid three rupees a month in those days. The water-bearers carried water in leather bladders slung across their shoulders and let out a squirt through its neck, which they controlled with a tight grip. They aimed the stream at the drains, while the sweepers cleaned them with a broom. A squirt this side of the drain, a squirt on the other. A flick of the wrist and the stream would become a torrent or a trickle; another flick and the squirt would swing right or left. The drains were cleaned twice a day— morning and evening, in the evening, without fail. Now perhaps they aren't washed even once. Maybe in small towns, but certainly not in cities. The halwais had also lighted their fires : the rising smoke ringed the area. Eyes would begin to smart again and again. The coach too was complaining. It complained louder when it was on a dirt road. Through his glasses, Bade Rai's eyes looked swollen and sadden— which is nothing surprising since eyes are so made that welling and swelling go together in them.

It must have taken us an hour to reach Khooni Baag. Bade Rai had a watch in his pocket. Reaching the spot, I felt as if the place was full of crying men and neighing horses. I had to give my head a vigorous shake before I could see the trees for what

they were. Still they looked to me as if they were flailing their limbs and cooing soundlessly. Bade Rai was in the lead. Kale had also joined us, having let the horses off for a breather. He preceded the group as the tracker. As we trailed him, my eyes strayed irresistably to the trees. To me it looked as if they were looking for something on the ground. Every now and then, they seemed to bend their necks to look more closely at something that aroused their suspicions. After a lengthy trek through the forest, we found a horse lying behind a clump of trees, close to a bridle path. It looked as if it had lain down to rest. It was Safed.

There were three gaping holes in his body. He had been tied to the tree before being riddled. Blood was still oozing from the holes. A thick stream of blood had made its way over his stomach. Slivers of dried blood stuck to the sides of the stream.

The feet had been tied. Eyes were wide open and seemed to have waited for a rescuer till the very end. The soft ground had soaked up all the blood. Kale fell on the body with a long-drawn out wail : 'Why did you have to leave me like this, my child! Better I'd died than to face the master after this, O God!'

Bade Rai squatted down on the ground, his head bent and almost touching the horse's neck. The staring eyes now looked directly at him. I stood directly behind Bade Rai, and it seemed to me that they were looking at me and telling me : 'You started all this!' I tried to look away. Branches of the tree to which he would been tied bent over again and again reaching out, it seemed, to grab me. The loosely hanging ropes seemed to slither towards my neck. For a moment the pupils of his eyes seemed to move—was it his ghost? With a mighty effort of will, I pulled myself out of the creeping paralysis. I had never imagined that my stupidity would lead to such a disastrous aftermath. Chhote Rai stood away from it, quiet by himself like the still waters of a moss-covered pond. Occasionally his lips moved, as if in prayer.

Bade Rai looked up at me. Chhote Rai and I helped him get up.

Kale was inconsolable.

According to custom, carcasses of large animals were always

handed over to butchers, but Safed did not meet that fate. His body was carted to the bank of the river, to the spot where once, returning from a tour of the zamindari, Bade Rai's path had been blocked on the Iron Bridge by a gang of dacoits, and Safed, with Bade Rai on his back, had made a flying leap across the river. This was all Bade Rai's fief. A pit was dug, and, between layers of salt, Safed's body was laid to rest, while we all watched. The pit was deep enough for the body to be beyond the reach of foraging animals. This method was normally used for the disposal of dead elephants, but the honour was extended to Safed. Religious rituals were performed at the spot for thirteen days ending with a feast for the brahmins. All the while, I was tormented by the thought that Safed had taken the punishment for a crime that was really mine.

On the fourteenth day, when the rituals had ended, Bade Rai took me to meet the Collector. The Collector did not in the least expect that Bade Rai would turn up to meet him at his bungalow. He didn't have the courage to turn us away, though if he had wished he could have done so. In fact, he received Bade Rai with great cordiality.

'Well, well, Rai Sahib,. . . I hear you're unhappy with me. Mrs. Dick told me so.'

'On the contrary, Mr. Dick, it's you who are unhappy with me.'

'Oh, no, not at all. I've put all that in the past. In fact, I pulled that fellow up. Misbehaving at the Zamindari Association meeting! I didn't quite get it at first. It was my mistake to support him.'

Bade Rai listened patiently. After he had said all this, Dick was at a loss, and there was an embarrassing silence. Finally, he broke it by saying : 'I'll call my wife, She likes you a lot.'

'But today I've come to see you,' Bade Rai said gravely.

'Sure. What can I do for you?' Mr. Dick was uncomfortable and was casting sidelong glances.

'I thought Gandhi was a fool. Crazy and stupid. Trying to challenge the mighty strength of the Empire with clumsy and blunt weapons like fasting, non-violence, passive resistance! What success

could he ever hope for? But I've now understood that force cannot be the weapon to fight someone who's mightier than you. I've brought my son Bhaskar with me. It was his gig which hit Mrs. Dick's phaeton. You got one son of mine, the one who was pulling the gig, riddled with bullets. But here's the guiltier one, the one who was driving the gig. I've brought him here to save you the trouble of getting him snatched and shot. Here he is! Please take your gun and shoot him with your own hands. I promise I won't utter a word! We Indians have infinite forbearance, and this'll help you know us better.'

I stared at Bade Rai. He was dead serious, though he did fumble once briefly. Dick's forehead was bathed in sweat. All he could do was to utter the words : 'Please be seated,' though both of us were already seated.

'I'd be happy if this business were also taken in hand as expeditiously as possible so that I could dispose of his body too while I'm still about it, and then devote my undivided attention to singing the praises of the British Empire, praying to God to add to its glory and lend greater statute to its majesty. I am happy too that in the eyes of the friend and foe, innocent and guilty, man and animal— all stand on the same footing, and are not subjected to discriminatory treatment.'

At this point Mrs. Dick came out and relief showed in Dick's face. She had gauged the delicacy of the situation, for she immediately offered apologies :

'We're very sorry, Rai Sahib. We hear some miscreants have shot your horse.'

Bade Rai's lips spread in a wry smile, then rolled up. The air seemed heavy like a sodden bale of cotton. I was still struggling with the idea of my sacrifice. Would Bade Rai really hand me over? Would I also be killed in cold blood like Safed?

Dick was terribly flustered. He said 'Ṣorry!' and disappeared into the house. Mrs. Dick was profusely apologetic, but Bade Rai had now fallen silent.

Throughout this episode, Chhote Rai had held his tongue, but

inwardly he was deeply hurt. A rebellion was brewing within him. After that day he made it a practice to go out in the evenings, alone and unaccompanied by servants or a coach. This was unimaginable in those days. An unescorted zamindar was a fallen zamindar— fallen on bad days. In fact, no member of the family could go anywhere unescorted : bodyguards were always in tow. This was out of sheer custom, not out of any perception of danger. A bodyguard followed me around till I started riding a bike, then there was a gap. Then another bicycle arrived and a bodyguard on it. He guarded not my body so much as my social standing. It was a different matter that I never found my social standing in any kind of danger either, against which he could guard it, though of course I did for some time labour under the misapprenhension that it was.

Chhote Rai always returned home late. This change in his behaviour was causing concern to Bade Rai. The Surājis were everywhere. Any adult returning home late in those days could be assumed to be spending his time either at a kothā or at the Congress Party office. In either case, the family had a reason for worry.

Chhote Rai was spending his time at the Congress Party office. The discovery that he had become a Congressman, was preaching rebellion against the rulers, taking part in *prabhātpherīs* (morning parades) and mouthing slogans, came very late. Majhhale Rai was on a visit home then. Alone, not with the new Majhhali Chachi. Actually, he was home to look over the zamindari accounts. The younger diwanjī had the accounts ready. Majhhale Chacha came home once every three or four months, collected the revenue receipts, deposited them in the bank and went back. The day Chhote Rai's compromising behaviour was discovered, he was slated to go back. But Chhote Rai's behaviour was considered so compromising that he postponed his return, though after some initial prevarication. Bade Rai told him pointedly : 'I'm aware that you're service class, and like all of them totally impatient to get back to your stall. On a week's leave, you'd never admit more than four days.' That had effectively shut him up.

Chhote Rai's weakness was that he could not open his mouth

before Bade Rai. Bade Rai called him to his room. Majhhale Rai was already in attendance. He told Chhote Rai to close the door. He did so, walked into the room and, as Bade Rai fixed him with his gaze, stood there with his head hanging. Bade Rai started on a soft note.

'I know, Raghav, that you're a responsible man yourself, and it isn't quite fitting that I should interfere in your affairs. I do, however, see it as my duty that I should, from time to time, in luck and out, keep warning both of you of the shape of things now and of the shape of things to come. My strained relations with Dick are no secret to you. Bhaskar's gig hit Mrs. Dick's coach, And Dick avenged himself by killing Safed. I hear the Police Captain also tried his best to stay his hand but he was determined. I have no doubt that he'll take every opportunity to strike at us again. Your joining the Congress at this juncture cannot but spell trouble for us. I am no one to pronounce judgement on the Congress— whether what it's doing is right or wrong, but there cannot be any doubt that it's fighting the government. Only a government can fight another government. How can people like us who have, generation after generation, done nothing but submit to the government's word, suddenly start scowling at it? It may be Gandhi, or Motilal, or his son Jawaharlal— they're in and out of jails at the pleasure of the government. They have nothing to lose because they've put everything on the line, but we still have the position and the honour of our family to think of. We have also to think of Rani, who must be married off soon. Who's going to marry her do you think if. . . Everyone'll say her uncle is a jailbird, a Surājī who is regularly dragged through the streets like a dog.'

Majhhale Rai looked at Chhote Rai, who stood silently. Then he queried :

'Did you understand what Bade Bhaiya said?' After a little pause, he added :

'Bade Bhaiya is an important man, with position and status. He might be able to ride out your indiscretions. But what about me? I'm an ordinary servant of the British government. When the authorities get to know that my brother is a Surājī, what do you

think is going to happen to my job?'

Chhote Rai loosened up now.

'Majhhale Bhaiya,' he said, 'When I had Powell Price for a friend, you were always seized with the fear that the white masters might take offence at something or the other we did or said, and we might face ruin. Now that I'm against the British, you're still seized with the same fear. Now you're worried about your job. However, if that's how you feel, I'll move into the Chhotī Kothī. You can then disown me and disclaim any relation with me. I'll not take offence.'

Bade Rai interpreted this as an answer intended for him. The left corner of his lips turned up. Fighting to control his voice, he said :

'Raghav, is that the spirit in which you took my advice? Krisnna here left home, got married without so much as a word to me— do you think that I ceased to be? And do you think that I'll die now if you leave home? No, I tell you, I shall not die; I shall not cease to be; I'll live and I'll live to the last day God has granted me.'

Chhote Rai immediately begged forgiveness with folded hands : 'I'm sorry, Bade Bhaiya, but what I said was not for you. True, that day I did feel we must stop slaving for the British— people who have no hesitation in taking a life to avenge a boyish lapse, peopíe who are not humans, but devils. If they can make an animal pay for a man's lapse, they can surely make a man pay for the lapse of a beast.'

'And you think if you join Congress, you'll be wearing a crown? I tell you they are a worse lot than us. Any policeman can take them by the scruff of their necks and push them into the gutter. At least we are spared that disgrace.' Chhote Rai again hung his head. Bade Rai continued : 'And this brother of yours, here, he's a Tehsildar. What happens to his job? Have you given it a thought?'

Chhote Rai was already feeling contrite. He felt he had overstepped the limits. But Majhhale Rai was miffed. He spoke with an edge to his voice :

'Bade Bhaiya, Raghav doesn't want to understand. He thinks of himself as a fighter, a rebel. With nothing to do, all he's good for is prabhātpherīs, slogan-shouting, Gandhi-hailing and police batons. He's bent on dragging our name through the mire!'

'No, Majhhale Bhaiya, I'll not take it from you; from Bade Bhaiyà, yes, but not from you! Do you think by slaving for the British you're writing our name in golden letters, do you?'

Bade Bhaiya butted in : 'Is that all you have to say? If so... if that's how it is... if everyone wants to have his own way. . . fine! let me also prepare for my final leave-taking. There's no way.. . absolutely no way I'll live in the luxuries of this house and let my brother rot in jail.'

Chhote Rai was off-balance. 'Give me some time to think. I feel sorry that you paid no attention at all to the issue of the country's freedom. We may of course have to suffer in this struggle, but we could ensure an honourable existence for Bhaskar's children.'

'I'll wait for your reply,' said Bade Rai. All of them got up to leave, lost to themselves.

That day, Chhote Rai and Chhoti Chachi were deep in conversation till late at night. They often talked to each other. That's what held them together, they felt. Sometimes their talk centred around issues. Chhote Rai asked :

'I've told you everything now. What do you say? Why should I accept these chains now? For whom?'

Chachi reflected a little, then said : 'What can I say? Do whatever you think best. I'm with you.'

Then she added :

'If Majhhale Bhaiya accepts your offer and we move into the smaller bungalow, who'll look after the kids? Jithānījī left them in my charge, and you love them so too! Rani is a girl, and still so young! Bhaskar, of course is grown up. If he were to get married I'd have one charge less. And then Bade Bhaiya! Isn't he our responsibility too?'

Chhote Rai turned over and said :

'Mahātmājī passed this way the other day— on his way to

Haridwar. I had the good fortune of meeting him. Chander Babu introduced me. 'The biggest zamindar of the area.' he said. Mahātmājī gave a laugh, a childlike laugh. I felt I was nothing, but I liked it. That laugh told me what I was really worth. I wish you'd been there. You'd have wondered how such a great man can come across so freely, so transparently! Chander Babu asked him : 'Mahātmājī, what should he do? Give him his instructions.' Mahātmājī said : 'I'm no one to give him instructions. He's a zamindar, he should give himself instructions, not wait for instructions from others. The real duty is to the Mother, the old Mother India. It's hard to look after the very old and the very young, because they can give nothing in return.' Then he looked towards me and said : 'Love everyone, including the British, but as human beings, not as masters. You love them as masters, don't you? Can't forget your colour. I say don't love even yourself as a master!' And he turned away, laughing. Sounds so ordinary in his Gujarati Hindi accent.'

'Is he a mahātmā (a great soul)?'

'He's not a mahātmā, he said.'If I'm a mahātmā, so are you, so is everybody. Anyone who works for the country is a mahātmā. Anyone who feels for the other's sorrow is a mahātmā. Anyone who knows this— what's he if not a mahātmā?"

After a while, Chhoti Chachi broke the silence with :

'So? What have you decided?'

'I feel we should serve the country and look to its needs.'

'And these kids? What'll Jethji say? 'One brother had already deserted me, now the second one too!' But it's your decision. It's death for me either way— or life either way.'

Chhote Rai spent the whole night tossing in the bed. He had visions of Gandhi and Bade Rai standing side by side. When Chhote Rai looked at him, Gandhi would burst out laughing— his usual childlike laugh : 'Can't decide? Just think whose need is greater?'

He looked at Bade Rai. He wore a grave expression. Chhote Rai couldn't help thinking of Bade Rai as standing beside him holding his finger like a little child.

Next morning Chhote Rai went up to Bade Rai and said :

'I've decided. I'll stand by you.' Then he added : 'I do wish you could meet the Mahātmā once.'

Bade Rai just laughed!

Chhote Rai had withdrawn into himself. The flames of his burning conscience kept leaping out at him, singeing his soul. He detested the work of the zamindari and did everything to escape from it. To any and every problem his response was the same : 'Do what you think best, Bhaskar. I've got nothing to do with it. I could show no courage or honesty in the discharge of a responsibility that I had accepted willingly and knowingly; what justice will I be able to do with one I've received in inheritance? This is all easy come, easy go.'

He almost never stirred out. Cooped up in his room all day, he stood still like a pool of stagnant water. All that he did was to read books : books of history, books that described the freedom struggles of different nations. Sometimes he felt that his reading was beginning to stir the still waters of his life, but when action failed him, he sat and cried. Knees pressed to the ground, fingers of the two hands interlaced on his lap, he sat gazing at the infinite space as if trying to establish communication with it. Sometimes he would address himself to Gandhijī : 'No, Mahātmāji, I haven't forgotten the message you gave me. I still remember it, but what use is it for me to remember it? I'm a tethered beast. I look longingly around me and I go round and round the post. The best I can do is to exercise a few leaps, still tethered to the post. For me nothing is now left except to eat and to drink and to keep myself alive. Chander Babu was wrong : I'm no zamindar; I'm a slave : bought, bonded, paid for, and tied to the Rai family with fake notions of prestige. I can never, never be free, except in my dreams. . .'

The sight of the grieving Chhote Rai saddened Chhoti Chachi. She tried to put it to him that they could try to devote themselves to Surāj, if that was what he wanted. 'Don't make yourself so unhappy. Your happiness is all that I live for. If I said anything different, it was only because we have already accepted the responsibility of nursing and rearing these little plants. Having done

so, how can we leave them standing in the sun and withdraw into the shade ourselves?'

'I guess you're right, but being right is not all. One also needs a conscience. If I'm unhappy, it's only on account of my own decision. I killed my conscience. I first let the Mahātmā awaken it, then I killed it. Ever heard of dogs singing hymns to God! He only asked me for a fistful of earth. . . that too not for himself, but for Mother. I extended my hand to give. . ., but I pulled it back. What could I have given to Gandhi anyway? He needs nothing, while thousands wait to give him whatever he asks for. He who wants nothing is the king of all kings. He gave up dresses, gave up food, gave up his home, and clothed himself in a loincloth and a stick. . . He declassed himself; he became what this country is : a poor man with a stick and a loincloth, hungry and fasting, walking on his two feet. He sentenced himself to the same punishment that this whole country is taking. Whatever could be given up, he gave up. He dashed his own image to the ground. And here I am, stuck with this face, this dress, these guts! Whatever shall I do with this image that sticks to me like a disfigured mask?'

Much of this was incomprehensible to Chhoti Chachi. Her only fear was that she might be losing Chhote Rai, and she blamed herself for it. Only if she had agreed to his wish! Thrilled, like a little child, he would have clasped her to his heart. But there was Arun to consider : The plant had to be nursed and watered, if you wanted it to yield fruit one day! Her own lap had to be prepared for adoption. She found herself divided between all the elements of this scenario— the water, the lap, the tree of which Arun was the fruit and which she was hoping to shake well enough one day so the fruit would land squarely in her lap. Her longing for a child could only be sated by the adoption of Arun. The problem was how to forget her own sorrow and lose herself in the search for a cure for her husband's? She was prepared for that too, for she knew that a woman's sorrow could become her whole life and stay permanently within her; but a man's sorrow is like a flood that sweeps everything in its path.

The fiefdom was becoming a millstone round our necks with each passing day. Neither Bade Rai nor Chhote Rai had any inkling of this. For Bade Rai, zamindari was like the wishing-pot granted to Draupadi by the Sun God himself. It got us food without the need for grinding and cooking; it made sure of Bade Rai's pomp and grandeur; it saw to our feasts and parties. Whenever you wanted something, you rubbed it like Aladin's lamp and, presto! there it was! You hit the tree and gathered rupees like falling fruit! I was nowhere in the picture. But I often shook like water in the wishing-pot, was rubbed like the lamp of Aladin, and hit like the tree of money!

Nawab Chhatari was the lāt (Lord Governor) of U.P. then. The super-Lāt (Viceroy) was in Delhi. The Governor was on tour and was visiting our town. Bade Rai had played the main role in arranging his visit. When he went to call on him at his camp, I went with him. Chhote Rai refused. All the big zamindars of the area were in attendance, dressed in turban and suits, as if attending court. The personal secretary to the Governor was a Britisher. He was managing the visitors. When the turn came, he would take the visitor to the main door of the hall where the Governor was esconced, would open the door and announce the caller : 'Your Excellency, Mr. So-and-So at your service!' If His Excellency was deemed not familiar with the caller, he would add a sentence or two by way of introduction. Then the A.D.C. would escort the person to His Excellency. When it was Bade Rai's turn, he was first taken in. The secretary opened the door and, bowing a little, announced:

'Mr. Hari Rai, MBE, and his son Bhaskar Rai!'

Nawab Chhatari got up to receive us. The sofa on which he sat was a huge, velvet-covered affair. Facing it stood a divan. His Excellency wore Aligarhī pajamas, a black achkan. a golden chain leading to a pocket watch, and a high velvet cap. The raised achkan collar had gold embroidery on it.

Shaking hands with him, Bade Rai gave a hint of a bow. Then he introduced me and I made my obeisance. He showered blessings on me : 'May you take your noble lineage from strength to strength in the manner of your father! May the sun of the Empire

continue to shine on you!' Then laughed : 'But for all this to happen, you need to be a well-wisher of the Empire, my son!'

Bade Rai acknowledged the blessings and the advice on my behalf and spoke in English :

'My family will never give you a reason for complaint, Your Excellency! We've always been well-wishers of the Royal Crown, but. . .'

'I know. . . I know. . . It was extremely prudent of you to apply the brakes on your brother before he got fully derailed. It has not escaped my notice.'

Bade Rai was shaken to the core. Nawab Chhatari continued:

'I greatly admire the way you handled the situation. It's not easy to make the misguided see reason.'

A brief pause, then he added :

'I've been informed that Mr. Dick has misbehaved with you. A close friend and well-wisher of the Crown should not have been subjected to such treatment.'

Bade Rai made to say something but the Nawab's raised hand stopped him, as he continued :

'He had your finest horse killed, didn't he?'

I was now getting nervous. The Nawab was getting closer and closer to the night of my misadventure. Would he mention the gig and Mrs. Dick's phaeton? Suddenly the Nawab turned to me and said :

'Who's horse-riding for, if not for the sons of our zamindars? Don't you agree, son! After all a beast is a beast who knows when it'll decide not to cooperate? Anyhow, I'll talk to Dick about it.'

These light-veined remarks quickly eased all the tension that had been building up. Bade Rai was relaxed. His eyes reflected the assumption that Nawab Sahib had nothing but a positive regard for him, but still he was troubled by one question : How did he get to know about that incident? How did he find out about Chhote Rai? Who was leaking out family secrets?

It was again Nawab Sahib who spoke :

'You can forget about that episode. Just keep an eye on your brother.'

'You needn't worry at all, Your Excellency.'
Suddenly, the Nawab remembered something.
'Isn't one of your brothers a Tehsildar?'
'It's all your kindness, sir.'
The Nawab again changed tracks :
'The Knighthoods have been put off this time,' he said.
'Jagadamba Babu too?' asked Bade Rai.
The Nawab just laughed.

Before we took our leave, Bade Rai extended an invitation to His Excellency :

'I'll be deeply honoured if you'd kindly agree to dine with me tomorrow.'

The Nawab immediately rang the bell. The English secretary presented himself posthaste, but not without first pausing momentarily at the door and making a bow.

'Hari Rai Sahib wants to have us for dinner. When can we go?'

The secretary gave a date three days away. The nawab nodded and the secretary withdrew.

'Hari Rai Sahib, could we have this dinner in the Town Hall? I've already turned down an invitation from Rai Bahadur Jagdamba Prasad. He wanted to have it at his residence. . .

Bade Rai thought a little and consented.

The dinner was arranged in the Town Hall. There was no electricity then, and burning torches were used for lighting. Though the lighting of those days would hardly stand comparison with the lighting today, yet there is a difference. That lighting illumined the eyes and one could really see light; this lighting lights up the things outside, and lights them up so hard that one can't see the things for the light. Result : light equals darkness. Gas lights, though all set to become fashionable, were still few and far between. The long tables were lit with candles, which were all imported from England. Liveried men fanned the guests with large palm leaves. As the fans swayed, so did the ambience. Chairs and sofas stood in rows. Placed centrally, and on a platform, was a large sofa. Sofas

in those days were covered in sheer leather. Thick velvet antimacassars were mounted atop the leather. We had two such sofas at home : one always lay covered, the other in the drawing room, also called the *baithak* or the *nashistagāh*. Rahmatullah and his assistant stitched brand new antimacassars for these sofas overnight. When they were mounted on the sofas, the whole place lighted up.

On the very day the dinner was decided on, I was asked to leave for Delhi where we had a family friend— Lala Rangimal. The halwais of Delhi were then known far and wide for their expertise in the preparation of sweetmeats. The fine grained nugdi ladoos. khastā, sohan halvā, pishtā barfī— all these mouth- watering delicacies were almost the exclusive speciality of the Delhi halwais. Lala Rangimal was their doyen : they were his henchmen. He personally got all the ingredients collected and sent four of his best cooks to prepare the delicacies. They carried the most stringent admonitions from Lala Rangimal to the effect that the reputation of the Delhi halwais was not to be compromised at any cost. The Governor Sahib must remember the dinner till the end of his days! One never forgets what one eats with one's own mouth and hears from another's! All the items were prepared at home except those that needed to be served hot, e.g., beramis, pūrīs, kachaurīs, vegetables, pishtā pudding, saffron sweet, and many things besides. Everything vegetarian, of course. Mr. Dick did send a message through someone about a couple of non-vegetarian dishes to be included, but Bade Rai refused. It was a wonder that so much was nevertheless accomplished in so short a time.

All of us— me, Chhote Rai, Bhavani, Chhoti Chachi, Rahmatullah, the entire team of servants, horse carriages, tongas, sāīses- – worked without a break for three days and nights. No rest, no sleep. A message was also sent to Majhhale Rai on the very day the dinner was decided on, but he arrived in the afternoon of the dinner day and was immediately roped in. Bade Rai spent the whole day trying on the dress he would wear for the dinner. Every few hours he would send inquiries to check if everything was on schedule, or if anything needed special attention. Pure

rosewater had been ordered for rinsing hands— another of Lala Rangimal's responsibilities— but it was now estimated that the quantities ordered would be inadequate. Immediately, special fires were commissioned for extracting more rosewater. Still, not enough could be extracted. A decision was then taken that pure rosewater be used only for outside guests; others would have to make do with one-third water in the rosewater. Various kinds of perfumes and essences— *itr-e-gil, itr-e-henna, itr-e-koi*— had also been ordered from Delhi, courtesy Gulāb Gandhi, and the guests were being sprinkled with these perfumes.

A variety of music-makers were in attendance too— and they had stationed themselves in different quarters around the place. The Scottish pipes were very popular then. Played by Gurkhas, the pipes were led by a British drum major. They marched, they threw their drums up, they twirled their drumsticks, and they went around in circles. In knee-high stockings and kilts, they made formations and broke them and made them again. Others played their instruments sitting. A machān had been rigged up at the gate and, dressed in a sequinned, silken achkan, Bundu Shahnaimaster played his shahnai atop it.

The Lāt Sahib was borne in on an open palanquin of spangled and embroidered glory. As he stepped on the ground, guns were fired. People formed themselves into two rows on either side of him. The highest of the high officials, talukdars, zamindars, rich nobility— all stood in resplendent dresses, some stitched specially for the occasion. Almost everyone had a gold chain round his neck: the bigger the personage, the pricier the chain. Bade Rai and the Collector received the Nawab. The first time after that day, Bade Rai and Dick had come face to face. Four of us stood behind Bade Rai— Majhhale Rai, Chhote Rai, me, and, bringing up the rear in a glittering livery, a towel slung over his shoulder, was Bhavani.

The proceedings started with Bade Rai welcoming the Nawab and making a gift-presentation to him on a silver salver. Although gifts were generally presented to kings only, Bade Rai considered the Governor to be an equivalent. Once he had had the privilege

of meeting the Viceroy and had presented him with a diamond studded ring. Next Majhhale Rai brushed his achkan with perfume. Chhote Rai followed, against his wish, with a bouquet of the rarest roses. Bade Rai made it a point to introduce him : 'My youngest brother Raghav Rai, a student of Powell Price.' Nawab Chhatari swung a cursory but penetrating glance towards him. Dick was getting restless. He thought that, as Collector, his was the first claim on the reception of the Governor, but Bade Rai thought differently. Though the venue happened to be the Town Hall Club, it was his dinner party first and last, and he had all the rights of the host. In fact, the Collector too was there as his guest. So, the Collector and his wife got to shake the gubernatorial hand only after we released it. Next followed the Police Captain and the District Judge, Judge Martin. The Commissioner too was with them.

The Chairman of the Municipal Board, Barkat Ali Khan, also huffed and puffed his way into the pandal (enclosure) at this point. It was rumoured about him that whenever he had to go calling, he would first change into a series of achkans, then a series of pairs of shoes, then he would go to the toilet again. . . and that was how he was always late for his appointments. When Bade Rai saw him, he said : 'Barkat Ali Sahib, the Governor has been asking for you. . he's already asked twice.'

Barkat Sahib's hands shot up to touch his ears : 'Toba, toba,. . . I'm guilty of dreadful discourtesy. But, tell me, was he annoyed?'

Deputy Collector, Mujibul Hasan, immediately joined in :

'He only said that Barkat Ali Sahib must pay a suitable penalty for the discourtesy.'

'Oh, God! What shall I do now? Please do something.'

'Promise us a big dinner and we may be able to save you.'

That was a small price to pay, thought Barkat Ali, and agreed promptly.

Nawab Chhatari looked at Bade Rai, and then at Dick. He then took Dick by the hand and moved a couple of steps towards Bade Rai.

'Two pillars of a standing structure do not clash with each

other,' he said and turned to Bade Rai. 'Let bygones be bygones, Mr. Hari Rai. Accept this hand of friendship.'

They shook hands. Dick took Bade Rai in his embrace. Mrs. Dick grew sentimental. 'I'm very happy today,' she said. Everyone clapped. There was happiness all round. Mrs. Dick went up to Bade Rai.

'I've regained a lost friend,' she said.

There were many who chose not to eat at the table, Bade Rai one of them. On his own, he excused himself on the ground that he must look after the guests and the arrangements. But when the Lāt took his seat at the table, as chief host he had to sit next to him for a while. A toast of fruit juice in silver goblets was drunk to the long life of the King Emperor and the greater might of the Empire. Then Bade Rai nibbled at some fruit and, with an apology, got up and stationed himself behind the Nawab's chair for a while. Soon his hostly duties had him moving from chair to chair in polite inquiry : 'Can I get you something? Surely you must have this!' The Governor and the British guests were exclusively his charge.

As the spread of delicacies on the table swayed with the candle flames, the dishes seemed to float. Chaudhri Mehtab Singh and Chaudhri Shyam Singh were considered champion eaters with Rai Bahadur Devi Singh close on their heels. His friends kept teasing Devi Singh, which annoyed him but did not slow down his speed. His angry ripostes to them did not detract from his feisty repast. Occasionally, he would feign that the limits of patience had been reached and that he would leave the dinner forthwith, but his forewarned neighbours at the table would make a great show of regret and would sit him down again. He promptly resumed his pleasant preoccupation with the food, causing a lot of mirth and laughter all round, and these served as digestives.

The Nawab too enjoyed these mirthful capers and occasionally allowed himself a smile. He had perhaps taken only a few bites when his eyes fell on a bhistī (water-bearer) who was watering the potted plants around the place. He immediately beckoned his A.D.C. to his side who lowered himself to receive the whispered message. Then he marched to the water-bearer and fetched him to the

Nawab's presence. The Nawab offered a seat to him and said :

'Come, sit down and have dinner. My religion does not allow me to eat while my brother is at work without food.'

The water-bearer was agape. He looked around him like an animal trapped in a hall of mirrors. Terrified at his own face peering at him from all sides, he didn't know which way to run. He was too bewildered to speak, but he repeatedly begged to be excused, folded his hands in entreaty, and kept saluting the Nawab. The guests had frozen in different postures and there was palpable tension in the air. The Nawab was conscious of the reaction, but paid no attention to it. A chair had been placed beside his. The bhīstī was made to sit on it. His half-bloated water-bladder lay sprawled on the ground. As the water in it heaved, it appeared as if it was alive and breathing. The diners were sickened and felt revolted.

No one could decide whether to carry on or to withdraw. Withdrawal was difficult : after all, it was the Governor, no less. And the Governor was now talking to the bhistī : 'How many kids?' 'How do you make ends meet?' and so on. The guests were now only going through the necessary motions of eating, but most simply sipped water. Bade Rai's face was flushed. All the stupendous preparations had gone waste. The guests were going hungry, their hands frozen in mid-air, their feet rooted to the ground.

Bade Rai walked up to Iddu Bhīstī and tried to reassure him : 'Don't be nervous! Take it easy! All this is for you. Eat. You're Nawab Sahib's guest, therefore my guest. You may not have another occasion like this in your life. Come, let me serve you with my own hands!'

Nawab Sahib cast a sideways glance at Bade Rai. He was serving pudding to the bhistī, but the bhīstī got up and said : 'Don't condemn me to hell, huzūr. I've lived on your crumbs; my ancestors lived on the crumbs thrown out of your house.'

Bade Rai placed a hand on his shoulder and said : 'Sit down, eat, forget the past for the moment, and concentrate on what is happening before your eyes.'

The town gentry was divided. One school of thought put the entire

blame on Bade Rai. If you invite a guest to dinner you share the table with him, they said. If you do a Rana Pratap to a Raja Mansingh, you get what it takes. The Nawab had his revenge through the *bistī*. Others sided with Bade Rai. Some made the tongue-in-cheek remark that the Nawab may have had an ancestral affinity with the particular occupation in question. A third group was indifferent. In their eyes both sides were right. Why get involved in the affairs of the high and the mighty? Comments were also heard which lauded Bade Rai for giving a fitting reply to the Nawab. Here the matter was complicated with undertones of the communal Hindu-Muslim issue. There were counter-arguments too which held Nawab Chhatāri guilty of insulting Hindus. Muslims of course considered it a sign of the greatness of the man that he offered a seat at his table to a lowly human like Iddu. Could we ever expect such an act from a Hindu, they asked.

The dinner had left Bade Rai uneasy. People's comments distressed him. Like everyone else who was sharing the table with the Nawab, he did feel offended by the Nawab's action in offering a seat at the table to one with a filthy and foul-smelling body. No notice was taken of his clothes, or of his unwashed hands. Being wet all the time, his fingers and toes suffered from chapped skin and blisters as a remedy for which he applied red katthā (catechu) paste on them after work everyday. The result was that his hands and feet looked sickly red suggesting gangrenous decay. The sight had put everyone off food. What troubled Bade Rai most was the suspicion that this might have been the Nawab's reply to his impertinence in inviting him to dinner knowing full well that his own brother was a Surājī. Do not overplay the well-wisher role, he seemed to be telling Bade Rai, your real face is unmasked. What however was beyond doubt was that his honour, and the investment in the dinner, had been reduced to mud. A lowly commoner had been raised above the heads of the nobility of the town. Was this the new British policy? To put into practice what Gandhi was preaching? Majhhale Rai was of the firm opinion that whatever happened must be taken to be a direct manifestation of the Crown policy.

Bade Rai heard everything but kept his own counsel. He could sense the real intention behind the whole business. The knock-out blow against him had been reserved for this occasion. It was clear to him like the day. Chhote Rai's abortive attempt to join the Congress had been played up and the incident gave him a shrewd idea about how much it had been played up and by whom. What he could not however understand was how a regime in whose service, and for whose welfare and propagation, he had sacrificed his whole life could change its attitude towards him overnight. Are these regimes so insecure, so weak, that one error, one wrong step on the part of a misguided individual causes them to lose nerve and panic? Instead of trying to restore the individual to the right path, it forces him to stay in error, and indeed, to ensure his protection by going deeper into it. Aren't ordinary individuals like us made of sterner stuff that we at least try to evaluate what's right and what's wrong? It's another matter that we may not always succeed.

Majhhale Rai was to leave the next day. Bade Rai was shaving. Majhhale Rai came and seated himself near him. Bade Rai went on with his shave. Majhhale Rai was fidgety : he kept stirring and shifting. Bade Rai looked at him from the corner of his eye and, a little later, asked :

'How's Vir Bahadur, son of Chaudhri Sahib of Dūdhiya?'

'O.K. Actually. . .'

'Yes?'

'He's not happy with me. Someone's trying to put him up against me, telling him I accept bribes.'

'Do you?'

'How can I? But people bring gifts and I can't refuse them. His ways are strange. He thinks I should return the gifts, as he does. But can I afford to spoil my relationships with people?'

'How's bahu (sister-in-law)?' Bade Rai changed the topic.

'She's fine. I was thinking of bringing her this time but I had to leave in a hurry.'

'Didn't you get my message to bring her with you?'

'Someone had to stay at home. Joint Sahib is annoyed.'

His shaving hand stopped. He looked directly at Majhhale Rai and said :

'Krishna Rai, I can see exactly what you're trying to say. If you wish Bahu not to come here, that's your privilege. But what has Joint Sahib's annoyance got to do with her staying at home? If ever you think it fit, do let her get a glimpse of the doorstep of this house. . . the doorstep which has been blessed with the dust of our ancestors' feet for two centuries. As for accepting bribes, it's very good to hear you don't do it. You have nothing to fear then. However, gifts are bribes too. We know because we too send gifts and make them bigger and smaller depending on the size of the favour sought and the rank of the officer. The officer of course has the choice to accept the gift, and to still deny you the favour, but we. . . we must think very, very carefully. The common man is different, from them and from us. The common man has pride. . . . he gives word and he does not go back on it easily. Take Dick, for instance. We did everything we could for him, everything possible, and he subjected us to every conceivable injustice and ignominy. I want that you should not only be an officer, but also continue to be a common man— who values his word and his honesty above everything else. . . I hope you'll ponder what I've said.'

Majhhale Rai didn't like this sermon. It unsettled him. His forehead crumpled. He, however, kept his emotions in check and said very politely :

'If you could put in a word with the Governor, bhaiya, Vir Bahadur could be transferred out. . .

Bade Rai looked in the direction of Majhhale Rai but his eyes were focused at a great distance. They looked as if he was trying to make out a voice coming to him from a far, wondering if it actually belonged to 'my own brother Krishna.' Then he started re-lathering himself. Many minutes passed. He was still lathering. When the face almost disappeared into the lather, it suddenly occurred to him that he might use the razor. He picked up the cut-razor and the sharpening slate and started giving the razor an edge. Then he fingered the edge. Sharp enough. He started shaving.

Watching himself in the mirror, he pulled and tugged at the skin of his face, which disfigured it as if he had swallowed a stiff dose of quinine. The razor scraped on. Now this side, now that. As it neared the moustache, the hand faltered a little and he snicked himself. A thin line of blood sprang into view.

'You've cut yourself.' The words came involuntarily to Majhhale Rai's lips.

'Never mind. If you keep scraping and shearing, you're bound to cut yourself someday. It's not always that you can get at the hair without snicking the skin. He rubbed a little piece of alum on the cut. People always kept a piece of alum in their shaving bags in those days. That was the only device available to stop bleeding then.

Majhhale Rai felt Bade Rai was either ignoring him or had forgotten what he had said. So he repeated himself :

'What do you say about putting in a word with the Governor?'

'That's what is bothering me. Vir Bahadur is the son of Chaudhri Sahib of Dūdhiyā. To complain against him to the Governor would be as improper for me as it would be for Chaudhri Sahib to complain against you. If he did that, I'd never be able to forgive him; maybe he won't forgive me either. If you accept bribes . . .,' he paused a little, then continued, 'Would I be able to put any force in my words. . . speak with any conviction?' and he looked directly into Majhhale Rai's eyes. He averted them. But the next moment he blurted out :

'Bhaskar had actually been guilty of stabbing. . .

'If you want to tell me that I did it for him because he was my son, and won't do it for you because you're my brother, then let me tell you this : accepting bribes is worse than killing. If you'd killed someone for your honour, you'd see the lengths to which I'd have gone to help you, because I'd have been assured then that though you'd committed a crime you'd not demeaned yourself. There's a difference between fear and courage, between funk and spunk, and this is precisely it.'

'I knew you'd say that.'

'Of course, you knew, You had to know. You are my brother,

after all. And you must also know that in whatever I do I'll have your welfare in mind— though I may not be able to do what you want me to do. However, now that you have brought Bhaskar into it, I don't want you to nurse any grievances. The Governor is leaving today. After the dinner night's incident I'd decided not to attend his farewell, but now I will. For your sake. Be ready to go with me.'

He had finished shaving. Bhavani was gathering up the detritus. Bade Rai got up and went off to his bath. Majhhalė Rai stood there, silent, and scanned the skies.

It was the Governor's farewell. All the nobility of the town and the officers were present in full strength and stood with their hands folded. Dignitaries are dignitaries. Their departures, and possibly their deaths, if I may say so at the risk of being misunderstood, are as much occasions for celebration as their arrivals. The path leading to the Governor's camp was lined on both sides with people. As the Governor came out, he would first be greeted by officers, then the nobility. Chhote Rai had put his foot down this time : he would not attend the farewell. Period. Bade Rai couldn't argue. Majhhale Rai and myself were, of course, with Bade Rai, who looked very depressed. He stood third or fourth in the row. We stood behind him. When the Lāt came out of his camp, with all the paraphernalia of his rank, he first stood at the door and issued a general greeting. Then he inched forward, accepting a salute here, extending a hand there, overlooking an extended hand in between, and so on. The mere fact of His Excellency passing by showed everyone his status. When he came to Bade Rai, he stopped, gripped Bade Rai by the hand and said : 'I'm grateful for the dinner. . . and deeply honoured by your hospitality. . . I'm also sorry that I overlooked your custom and invited a bhistī to the table. Actually it is an old habit with me : before I sit down to a meal I look around to see if there is anyone going without a meal, and if I find one, I simply must have him with me. But I am indeed sorry that I forgot about your traditions. I shouldn't have.' Bade Rai pressed his hand in both of his own, smiled and said : 'You did

me an honour by accepting my invitation. .

Bade Rai was feeling greatly relieved by the explanation offered by the Nawab. He intoned softly : 'May your fame touch new heights, your glory rise. . .'

As the Nawab made to move on, Bade Rai introduced Majhhale Rai : 'This is my middle brother, Krishna Rai. He's come to pay his respects. He's a Tehsildar working under your protective shade and craves you blessings.'

The Governor nodded but did not shake his hand. Naturally, since the hands could not have spanned the yawning distance between a Governor and a Tehsildar. The extended hand of Majhhale Rai suddenly went limp. He was keen on a handshake so that when he went back he could put his hand on display as the hand that had held the Governor's hand in it. The Governor made some parting remarks : 'Tell him that he should follow your example. A tree can give one protective shade only as long as it lives; but the shade that one makes for oneself by one's honesty and probity lasts forever. These are important virtues, very important.'

It was as if a knockout blow hit Majhhale Rai. Others may or may not have heard these remarks, but he had. So had Bade Rai. Others, forming his train, simply moved on behind the Nawab. Bade Rai stood rooted to the spot, leaning on his cane and unable to move. The farewell was over, and the Nawab gone when he finally stirred.

The game was up. Kishen Babu had also lost the last two cases. That large, sunny and airy house which he had done up with so much loving care, was no longer his. He was literally on the streets. I was extremely worried on his account. I was trying to figure out some way of getting help to him. Even Bade Rai, in the heart of his hearts, felt obliged to him. I sought Chhote Rai's advice. He said : 'His misfortune today is of course of his own making, but one must admit that all the harm he's caused is to himself, not to any other.'

I didn't agree. I was of the view that even if Kishen Babu had not been afflicted with squandermania, the property could not

have lasted with him. With another claimant on the scene, how long could Kishen Babu have held him at bay? Actually, Kishen Babu had tried to reach an understanding with him on equal shares for both, but he didn't agree. Why would he? He was a much closer relative of the late lamented lady. It was just that they were late in finding him, and he was late in finding out about the whole business! He had moved to Multan with his father. When he returned, he came to know that the lady had departed this world and some upstart of a remote relative had acquired possession of the property. It did once occur to Kishen Babu, when he saw the new claimant, to drop everything like an old and wornout coat, roll up his rug and be on his way. It did not matter who found the coat after him and got into it. But then he discovered that the coat was holding on tight to him, and he didn't want to take it off at the point of a gun.

When Chhote Rai heard all this from me, he was surprised. Is Kishen Babu capable of so much reflection, he asked. As I had no comment to make on this, he continued : 'If he's capable of so much reflection, and is a man of so much self-respect, I'm sure he'll hesitate to accept any offers of help and may even reject them. Nevertheless, I'll speak to Bade Bhaiya. He has regard for him, though he doesn't show it.'

Till that moment Bade Rai of course had no inkling that Kishen Babu had lost the cases. When Chhote Rai told him, he sat withdrawn for a while, then said : 'No use crying over spilt milk now. It's just as well property rotates itself thus from one to another; this is the only way it can rid itself of the poison- – by passing it to another.' He paused. A little later, he asked :

'I presume Kishen Babu is educated.'

'Not much, I think.'

'Send the coach and get him over. Where's he living now?'

'He has a month's lease from the court.'

'All right, get him over here. It's not necessary for him to spend the lease there.'

Chhote Rai left. Bade Rai got up, stood at the window and

looked out. An eagle took off from somewhere and soared high in the sky till it began to look like a fly track scribbled on a slate by a child.

When Kishen Babu showed up, the expected woe-begone expression was completely missing from his face. He looked carefree and relaxed as ever, as if he had just got up from a refreshing sleep. The eyes were aglow with *surmā*, perhaps a result of thicker than usual application last night. The use of *surmā* at bedtime was a common practice in our house hold too. It was one of the fond pursuits of the rich to prepare and use varieties of *surmā;* in fact, it had become one of the marks of the classy rich. Some varieties were supposed to have magical and mesmerizing properties by which one could win the attentions of one's beloved. The accordion pleats of the *kurtā* and the pleated front fall of his *dhotī* looked as smart as ever. There was no hint of any change. The first thing he did on arriving was to touch Bade Rai's feet. Very odd, I thought. It was the first time I had seen him do it. In fact, I felt a bit ashamed. He was my father, after all, not his! So why should he do it?

Bade Rai initiated the conversation :

'Don't give it a second thought, Kishen Babu. Land, property, wealth, luxuries— these are like market prices— up now, down next. And the most fickle and faithless of all is land!

Kishen babu laughed :

'But it wasn't mine at all. What possible claim did I have on it? My ancestors didn't earn it! It came to me as a scrap of paper borne on a current of wind; it went out floating on another! How does one hold fast to something that rides a wind? And for how long? Just as well it went when it did. I can now be myself, Kishen Sahai, once again. Truth be told, these things take you away from yourself.'

Bade Rai wasn't prepared for this reaction at all. As he stared at Kishen Babu, it was Majhhale Rai who flashed in his mind. He didn't know why. He had nothing to do with the business in hand. But he pushed the thought aside and said :

'You're like Bhaskar to me, in a way, Bhaskar himself, since he lives the life you gave him. ' You must come and stay with us.'

Chhote Rai added his voice too : You're a source of strength to us and will remain so.'

Kishen Babu seemed as if he had been liberated; if anything, he looked a bit too liberated. Looking at him, one had the feeling that the property had been riding him like a spirit, forcing him to devour it while at the same time it devoured him. Now that it had flown away, that danger had been averted. None could devour him and there was nothing for him to devour. He had said something similar when he lost the case. He laughed again :

'What good am I? I drink. I take drugs. If I so much as get a whiff of property again, I'll start gorging myself, I'll forget myself and be someone else again. No, I'm now free, let me remain free. Now I can do as I please : I can roam around; I can cry if I want to, die if that's what I wish— or simply return to the good old place where my good old life still awaits my return in the same old tatters in which I left it to enter this world of razzmatazz.'

'If you don't wish to stay here, you're free to go wherever you like in the zamindari. . . roam as you please. . . the camps are all lying empty. And get your children here too. . .'

'Why not my own village, Bade Rai? What's wrong with it? I came away and it ceased to exist for me. The craze of property was on me, worse than drink, worse than drugs. Never knew when the horse bolted with me on its back. . . when I came round, the stall had been left far, far behind. In its place sat Kishen Babu. Now that the stall is back in my thoughts, please let me go back. Please don't do me this favour. . . if I don't return now, I'll never, never be able to return again. There's an old woman somewhere, and kids, whom I'd left stranded. . . let me go back to them. God knows how Time has treated them. Even the handle of a broken oar in one's hands, at times like this, can help one to row on.'

Kishen Babu was adrift in emotion and yet he was not allowing himself to be swept off his feet. It was hard for anyone to contradict him. So Bade Rai changed track and said :

'Come and stay with us for some time. Quit that house.'

'There's nothing to quit. Nothing to call my own. When I came, I had a rug and a sheet under my arm. The rest I squeezed from

this property. Now that I'm going I can take only that with me which I have consumed and enjoyed— the rest stays with this property. When I leave this property, I go back to where I came from and to no other place. Your memory will stay with me always— specially Bhaskar's. He has been to me a lifetime's gain. I'll be here to see him whenever I can. Do let me know when he gets married.' He looked at me with great longing.

Suddenly he got up and walked away. Before leaving, he bent down to touch Bade Rai's feet. Chhote Rai's eyes were wet. Bade Rai told me : 'Take the coach and drop him at home.'

He folded his hands and said : 'No, please don't. Let's put an end to this humbug forever. My feet have touched land after a long time; let them stay there.'

When he emerged from the haveli, Kishen Babu was humming a line from some song. It went something like this :

'Pick up now the tanpurā and sing the song of farewell.'

I followed him in silence.

We found his old servant at home. Kishen Babu had relieved him, but he was still hanging around refusing to leave. Kishen Babu took off his cap and placed it on a peg. Then he turned towards me and kept looking at me for some time. At length, he touched my cheek and said : 'You too, Bhaskar, are a gift of my razzmatazz days, but you're a human being and I can't leave you behind like these lifeless things, nor can I ever forget you. You're my spirit's ecstasy, my psychic high. I'm afraid I'll still need to take a pinch of opium everyday, though, to save myself from death. I don't want to die, not yet. I must squeeze the last drops out of my hard days too, so that when I die I have no regrets, so that, if the Hindus are right, I do not suffer rebirth, and, if the Muslims are to be believed, I re-awake fully content and without a longing in my heart when the clarion sounds on the Day of Reckoning. God will ask me what I want, and I'll laugh and I'll tell him : 'Leave me to myself, Lord; let the others enjoy your gifts.'

His servant started crying. He always did when Kishen Babu talked this way. 'He's always talking like that,' he would say.

Kishen Babu would laugh at this : 'Your eyes are fixed on the corpse, on the Kishen Babu who's dead and buried; my eyes are fixed on the Kishen Babu who still lives. You look at the elephant who's valuable but dead; I look at the little ant who's transporting a load several times in weight and is getting nearer to its goal with every laborious step, and has every reason to hope that she'll make it.'

'How and where did you get this new personality all of a sudden?' I asked him.

He laughed again : 'When I arrived here and started drinking to the fill from the cup of property, I acquired a new personality all of a sudden, didn't I? I didn't know then of drink, or of opium, or of mujrās and courtesans; I didn't know this Bhaskar either then! Yet overnight they became my closest friends. I must go now but can I take all of them with me? I have to acquire a new personality—a plain realization of what's possible and what's impossible is enough to ensure it. I must leave them all behind here, or I'll never be able to regain what I'd left behind there.' He pondered a little and then laughed : 'Maybe I can't leave two things behind— opium and you!'

The day Kishen Babu was to complete the stipulated month in the house, I was there quite early. The same old servant sat outside the house. The moment he saw me he started crying. I was filled with apprehension. I tried to calm him and to find out.

'Where's Kishen Babu? How come the house has a lock?'

'He got up at midnight and left!' He was still crying. I didn't quite grasp it : Kishen Babu had told me he would leave in the morning.

'Didn't you try to stop him?' I asked.

'He woke me up at midnight and said he was going. The streets were deserted then except for the dogs. I knew at once that it was still a long way to the morning. The watchman too sounded his staff. I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen. 'A fakir travels only at night,' he said. 'A fakir. . . that's what I am now. I didn't bring anything with me, I don't take anything with me.' A rug

under his arm, a sheet slung over his shoulder— God knows if he had any money or no. He'd left ten silver rupees on the table— probably for me. He told me while leaving : 'I'm leaving something for you on the table. Take it.' '

'And this lock?'

'The Sahib who's won the case was here early in the morning. Kishen Babu had put his lock on the door and given me the key with instructions to pass it on to the new Sahib. The new Sahib saw the house— fully furnished and everything in place, and was stumped. 'When's he going to collect his things?' he asked. I handed him the letter Kishen Babu had given me. He read the letter and was flabbergasted. 'What sort of man is this, your master,' he said. 'He has left everything behind. And he was fighting the case as if his life depended on it.' He then put his lock on the door and left. Told me to tell my master that he could collect his things whenever he wanted.' Then he suddenly remembered : 'He has left a letter for you too. . . that's why I was waiting here. Let me do this last duty, then I can take off too.'

The letter was written in Urdu. It said :

Dear Bhaskar,

Never did I love anyone more, not even God. Maybe if I'd seen Him I might've loved Him, but unseen is unloved. Love is a fire which once lit is hard to put out. For me this was foreign land : you helped me make it my own. I knew all along I was only the fruit of *amalatāsa*, not the tree itself; the day I fall I'll be nothing more than dust. This feeling never left me even when I was busy squeezing the inheritance. I knew and felt that it wasn't mine by rights; but there was pleasure in squeezing it, the pleasure of a bee sucking nectar from a flower. I had no regrets when I had to leave that flower. because a bee will always find another— that is in its nature. No matter where I live, I'll forever be gathering the nectar of love. But with this inheritance, that relationship comes to an end at midnight tonight. You will be here and, God willing, continue to be here. Through you,

I will be here too. Be mine, and I will BE. I'll come only to see you. I'm not the original Krishna who never returned to his love. Bade Rai has been extremely kind to me. I didn't really deserve the honour he bestowed on me, as nobody like me. . .

There's something you must know. Rahmatullah has decided to set up house with a courtesan. Though a courtesan in name, she's a boundless ocean of love and sacrifice. Rahmatullah too is not of this world, a saviour of the fallen and the sinful, the living God of our prayers!

I must bid you goodbye now. I do so in the hope that it's not goodbye forever. Do not, please do not entertain any misconceptions about Rahmatullah.

Your,
Kishen

It was strange that he had first used the phrase 'Your slave,' then struck it off. I was totally at a loss to understand why he had used this phrase for one who was so much younger to him. Was it that in the lovers' world which he roamed that was the standard phrase for a lover? And if it was, why did he strike it off?

As long as he was here, he never let us forget his presence; now, with the same insistence, he wasn't letting us forget his absence.

Rahmatullah's shop was closed. Many days had passed. Bhavani had been checking regularly on my bidding. The problem was that Arun would not stay with anyone except Rani or Chhoti Chachi; Bhavani, of course, was a treat for him, but, being Bade Rai's valet of sorts, Bhavani had to stay close to him as long as he was in the house. Often it happened that he had no time to take Arun out for a walk. On such occasions, he would leave him with Rahmatullah, who not only took him out for a walk but also kept him entertained with his constant chatter.

Now Arun was out of sorts. Rahmatullah's shop was his club. Now that the club was closed, he was back to being Rani's tail or

Bhavani's whimpering appendage. A small horse had also been procured for him. One sāīs walked ahead with the reins in his hands, another followed the horse lest Arun Baba should do a Humpty Dumpty. Rahmatullah too was often at hand issuing a string of do's and don'ts : 'Sit straight!' 'You're leaning to the right. . . don't lean to the right, you'll fall off!' Rahmatullah's greatest virtue was his engaging manner of talk which kept not only children but adults too hanging on to every word that fell from his lips. He had an inexhaustible fund of stories and jokes. When he told them, everyone except himself bent double with laughter. Arun greatly enjoyed his company.

The continued absence of Rahmatullah was beginning to worry me. And Chhote Rai too. A man was sent to his house only to be told that he had moved house. No one knew his new address, not even the neighbours. It was getting hopeless. Arun cried for him day and night. To keep him entertained, Bade Rai even took him to the club on many occasions and got him a set of used tennis balls. These balls were given away free, or at nominal cost, to members' children. But Arun never stopped crying for Rani at night and for Rahmatullah and Bhavani by day.

The news travelled to Bade Rai. He didn't express any reaction, but sent for Kale and told him to use his grapevine and locate Rahmatullah. Being a housekeeper and a confidant of Bade Rai, he couldn't have failed.

He didn't. On the third day, Rahmatullah showed up with Kale. Bade Rai was away attending a meeting when they came. When word reached Arun, he came running. Rahmatullah was overwhelmed, seized Arun, crushed him in his embrace and wouldn't let him go.

It took a while for the excitement and high jinks caused by Rahmatullah's re-appearance to die down. Everyone in the haveli who had any regard for Rahmatullah made it to the scene; they would even have lifted and shouldered him but for Chhote Rai's presence and mine. Chhote Rai called him. Arun was still in his arms and kept pulling his face towards himself, asking again and

again : 'You won't go away again, Bhaiya, will you?'

Rahmatullah only gave a smile. This question caused him great anguish. He didn't know what to say. Chhote Rai asked :

'What's the matter, Rahmatullah? Have you decided to leave us and set up business elsewhere?'

Rahmatullah didn't speak. Arun was keeping up his constant questions and suggestions.

'Let's go horse-riding,' he was saying.

'Yes, yes, right away, Arun Babu.'

Chhote Rai queried again :

'Why has your shop been closed so long? Have we done anything to offend you?'

He held up his folded hands. 'How can I even think of such a thing, master? I'm your vassal.'

'Then, what. . .?'

'In fact, it's I who have offended you. . .'

'Offended us? And we don't even know! What offence, Rahmatullah?' Chhote Rai laughed and joked : 'Looks like the Collector has summoned you back. Has he?'

His face went black. 'Throw me to the dogs, if you will, master, but don't ever bring such words to your lips. I am nobody, but it is still in my power not to set eyes on someone who had a defenceless animal killed, and if I am forced to, to gouge out my eyes before I do! Animals are like trees, sir, our friends and fellow-sufferers.. You cannot hang one who kills them, but you can at least refuse to look at him. For such people, there is no difference between Safed and me.'

His answer startled Chhote Rai, but also made him feel good. He said :

'Then why did you leave us and go away? Arun has been crying day and night. Every time we saw the closed shop, we were filled with apprehension : Where's Rahmatullah? What's happened to him?'

Rahmatullah couldn't raise his head. His eyes overflowed, his voice choked, and he sat still. Then he asked Arun :

'Go and tell Rani Didi Bhaiya is hungry; he wants something

to eat, will you, son?'

'You won't go away?' Arun wanted to be sure.

'No, no, how can I leave my little bhaiya?'

Arun went but quite unwillingly. He kept looking back to check if his bhaiya was still there. Then he hit something, stumbled and fell. Rahmatullah rushed and picked him up. He wasn't crying; only asked again and again : 'You won't go away?'

'No, son, I promise I won't go away.' This reassured Arun. Rahmatullah now addressed himself to Chhote Rai :

'Master, I can't face you after what I've done. I've set up house with a courtesan.' He said this without a trace of hesitation or shame. 'Kishen Babu attended the wedding. A great man! Too great for my small eyes to take in fully. He said to me : 'Rahmatullah, you've been a keeper of horses, a coachman and a horseman. I'm sure you love the horse you ride, and you look after him and you tend him. But here's a woman who degrades herself to give you happiness, who lets herself be a receptacle for your raging passions; isn't she deserving of your attention and your shelter? When God wants to give someone shelter, he too first finds an intermediary. You can't love and hate someone simultaneously, can you? She may be a courtesan, but so what? How can she be a receptacle for your love and also for your hate?' What Kishen Babu said touched me, touched me to the quick. I decided to marry her. When Bade Rai gets to know of this, I don't know what he'll say. I don't know what the ladies, the daughters of this house will say! I don't want to embarrass them, I don't want these young kids to keep my company.' He started crying.

Chhote Rai was in a fix. He tried to set out things clearly :

'Look, Rahmatullah. If you married her out of love, that was a good thing to do; if you married her out of a sense of duty, that was even better. An act of duty carries a suggestion of sacrifice and self-denial; love, on the other hand, is a gushing stream in which everyone so inclined can take a dip. I won't speak of hate: only those who know neither love nor duty indulge in it.'

Rahmatullah felt a familiar voice calling out to him. He said:

'Chhote Sahib, I can't live without these kids, nor can I show

them my face. I don't know what to do.'

'Do nothing except to decide, once and for all, in your own mind, whether what you did was a shameful thing to do, or there was nothing better you could've done. If you're ashamed of what you did, then you're right in what you're thinking; if not, open your shop the first thing tomorrow and get on with your work. Also remember that these things are known only to me and to Bhaskar.'

'Bade Rai is more than a father to me. If he finds out later that I have let him down, I'll talk to him.'

Now Arun was back with a servant maid carrying food in Muslim dishes. The talk of Muslim dishes sounds odd today, but that Muslim dishes had to be separate from Hindu dishes was an accepted fact then. The hearts were not separate, though. Things are different now. The dishes are no longer separate, but the hearts are. What a foolish deal we have made!

Rahmatullah laughed : 'I was only trying to snatch a few free moments with you, and he has gone and got a whole dinner.'

'Did you think we'd let you go without a meal?' said Chhote Rai. 'Eat! Look at yourself! What have you done to yourself in these few days? You didn't have to come here if you didn't want to, but why did you put a stop to your work?'

'Not come here? I live so far away now, yet I came here everyday after nightfall just to hear everyone was all right, to get a glimpse of anyone I could see. If I hadn't run into Kale Bhaiya, nobody would have ever found out if Rahmatullah was alive or dead.'

Then he said : 'Let me take the food home.'

'No, you eat it here. I have asked food for home to be arranged separately.'

There were tears in Rahmatullah's eyes.

The problem was how to break the news to Bade Rai. Chhote Rai spent a couple of days trying to figure out a way. He also asked me. We didn't know how he'd react. Would he forgive him? Bade Rai had a close friend, Mansukh Rai. There was a time when the

two couldn't be parted. It could be said of them that they drank from the same glass, and shared the same bread. Only the infamous cup was missing. But wagging tongues did not rule out the cup altogether, though there were of course no eyewitnesses present. They played sitar together. Wagging tongues also wagged to the effect that Mansukh Rai and Hari Rai attended the mujrās of Gauhar Jaan of Calcutta together. About Gauhar Jaan it is said that her evening rides were on a four-horse carriage, though no one except the Viceroy was allowed to use one. Anyone riding a four-horse carriage had to pay a fine. She rode everyday and paid everyday. One must however mention that like the nobility, courtesans too in those days were favourite subjects of numerous stories, some true others not so true. These stories were something like the bardic chants in kingly courts. The two friends had also attended the famous mujrās of Chappanchhurī.

Mansukh Rai had gone and married a courtesan— well, not exactly married, but taken as a mistress. She was set up separately in a small haveli. Mansukh Rai, who was always for a joke, used to say : 'A mistress gives you the feeling that you're going to a party; a wife, on the other hand, is like the *chaukā* at home : a piece of charcoal drew up your boundaries, and there you had to sit. The same seat, the same plate. You put your foot on the first step at the mistress's, and you never knew if you raced up the staircase, or were borne there on wings. Anyway, his marriage queered the pitch of their friendship. Last year, when Mansukh Rai died in a Delhi hospital, he called Bade Rai from his deathbed. At first Bade Rai was undecided : to go or not to go? Chhote Rai tried to persuade him to go. 'Bade Bhaiya,' he said, 'Death ends all. It knows no sins, no distinctions, no considerations of right and wrong. Mansukh Rai is in that state of twilight. He's been your childhood friend. Maybe he made a mistake. Must he pay for it till the very end? Must he die with even his last wish unfulfilled? A friend is a friend. A dying man looks at his friend and thinks : That's me too. . . the 'me' that'll live after me.'

Bade Rai was persuaded. When he entered the hospital room, he found his friend's eyes focused at the door. The moment he

entered, Mansukh Rai smiled a wan smile, like a dry leaf moving. Then he said :

'I knew, Hari, you'd come. No matter how angry you might have been, you'd come. When death is tugging at your feet trying to swallow you up like an alligator, if a friend comes along, clasps your hand and says 'I'm with you,' it becomes so much more easy to battle that alligator.'

Bade Rai was consternated to see his friend's condition. The giant of a friend he remembered from his younger days, the man a single strike of whose heel on the earth could cause it to spring a leak, looked like a child stricken with kwashiorkor. Mansukh Rai heaved a sigh and said :

'I don't know if you'll ever be able to forgive me, but I do entreat you to forgive this woman. She has been your company too at one time. She couldn't keep you, so she'd to be satisfied with me. I can settle my scores with you in the next life, but this woman. . . she has still this life to live. I have now no one to call my own except her. My brothers, my sons, my wife and all my relatives have turned away from me. All my property, all my land I gave away to them because she said so. Everything except a small haveli. It belongs to her. But what'll she live on? She has now neither the crow's nest, nor a branch or her own. If you'll only tell me you'll lend a helping hand, I'll be able to die in peace. Or I may have to come back as a ghost to protect her. . . that is if I can offer any protection at all. She may have spent some of her days with me, but some of her days fall in your lot too, don't you think?'

Bade Rai was contemplating her. She seemed to have been reduce to the very dregs of life. He had an image of her in his mind which had frozen in time and he was not ready to change it. He found it difficult to concentrate. He didn't like Mansukh Rai citing the old times. Yes, he had known her, so what? He also regretted the fact that he had come to his friend when his life had run out of steam, the engine was giving its last few splutters, and soon everything would be over. Mansukh Rai's gaze was fixed at him. Now he was getting a fit of hiccups. All his life seemed to have

gathered into his eyes, with some possibly escaping to his ears. Bade Rai thought of the descriptions of merit given at the end of the chapters of the vernacular Gita : This man donated the fruits of virtue he had garnered by practising the preachings from such and such a chapter from the Gita, and the man on the death-bed not only met a peaceful end, but his soul departed straight to heaven. There wasn't much point in debating whether or not there existed such a place as heaven, or whether his soul did or did not make it to that place in case it did; the important point was that the recalcitrant soul departed the body in peace. Mansukh Rai was now finding it difficult to keep his eyes open. He started shaking his head impatiently as if someone was trying to strangle him and he was asking him to hold off for a minute and let him get the answer to his question. All his life man is busy asking questions, but if he can get the answer to the last question he asks, it becomes easier for him to reconcile himself to all the questions that have gone unanswered before. Bade Rai felt he was losing his breath too. He spoke quickly : 'Don't worry about her, Mansukh. She's my bhabhi from this day. . .' He hadn't even completed his sentence, when 'Out! Out! Brief candle,' and Mansukh Rai wasn't listening any more! The pained and pitiable expression on his face was suddenly replaced by the equanimous expression of one who had achieved self-realization. Contentment personified! Bade Rai turned to her. She stood by the wall in stony silence. All the hubbub and noise of the hospital suddenly died down; the bustle of the crowded public place gave way to the perfect silence of a stilled mind.

He looked at Mansukh Rai and spoke as if to him : 'I had a friend's quarrel with him. No need to tell you about all that. You know me as well you did him, but all that's irrelevant now. Nor is this the time to argue about who was right and who was wrong. If you want to continue to live in your haveli, you may do so.

if you want to move to some other place, I'll make the necessary arrangements. I cannot bring Mansukh back, nor can I take his place; there was a time when I could. I chose then not to. . .' He suddenly realized he shouldn't have said this last sentence. She turned her moist eyes towards him and he was shaken to see the fathomless depths in them. Bade Rai felt himself beating around

in those depths. Slowly, those eyes grew familiar and the unforgotten memories came flooding back. He turned his back towards her.

Bade Rai himself performed the last rites. Then he arranged her to be sent to her place. She wanted to go back to the house where she'd spent her happiest years with Mansukh Rai. Her expenses were sent to her every month. Bade Rai personally went and warned her relatives not to meddle with Tulsibai as long as she lived. At her death, the haveli would come to them.

Chhote Rai couldn't help drawing a parallel with the Mansukh Rai episode. Bade Rai could go either way. It was possible that that episode might have changed Bade Rai's way of looking at things; it was also possible that he had permanently shuttered his store of sympathy after that incident. Mustering all his courage, however, on the night of the third day, Chhote Rai revealed all to Bade Rai. It upset Bade Rai so much that for once Chhote Rai got worried. Bade Rai was saying : 'Mansukha left me half dead. . . they now want me dead. Why? What did I do? I never harmed anyone. . . except myself. Then why this punishment? I'm still paying in pain for whatever Mansukh Rai did, Krishna Rai is still extorting his tribute of torture and pain, and now Rahmatullah. . . with a repeat performance of Mansukh Rai.

He was so distraught that one could feel the fires burning within him. As he spoke, he hit his head again and again against the back of the sofa.

Chhote Rai was nonplussed. It was his first experience of Bade Rai in such an agitated state. He tried his hand at mitigation:

'Do forgive me, Bade Bhaiya : it wasn't my intention to upset you. I only wanted to bring it to your notice that Rahmatullah had shut down his business only because he didn't have the courage to face you. . . now he has nothing to eat. He feels he has lost caste with us and is no longer fit to step inside the haveli anymore.'

'O.K. So let him not step inside. First it was Mansukh Rai who made me eat dirt; now Rahmatullah wants to prove to me that he is loyal, faithful and honest. The truly loyal aren't always the ones who cut the Gordian knot at one stroke : they too are

loyal who roast over slow fire! Here all of them are faithful and loyal and brave. Brave! Let them go and prove their valour elsewhere, but leave me to myself. It'd have been better if he'd never turned up.'

'He wouldn't have, had it not been for Kale.'

'That's right. And who sent Kale? Me again! I never knew that Rahmatullah would come back towering as a challenge over me!'

Chhote Rai was at a loss to understand what it was he had said that had sent Bade Rai flying off the handle. He tried to pacify him :

'Bade Bhaiya, I'm not blaming you. I was only giving you the facts.'

'Of course, nobody blames anyone; nobody does anything. Only I do, only I blame. . .'

Chhote Rai knew it would be unwise to continue. So he got up.

I was standing outside the door, listening. When Chhote Rai got up to leave, Bade Rai said : 'Sit down.'

He sat down again. Bade Rai took out a letter from his pocket and handed it to Chhote Rai. It was from Kishen Babu, from his village. It said :

> '. . . I'm responsible for Rahmatullah's *nikāh*. By marrying Sitabo Bai, he has only done my bidding. You had held out your protective hand to me; it's my earnest request that you may please keep this hand extended to him too. If you want to punish anyone, it must be me : I'm the guilty one. But please do not withdraw the hand of blessing that you have extended to him. Sitabo Bai is a victim of misfortune. Born in a high family, she has been chased into life's blind alleys by Time. But for this, she would have been a family woman today— with a husband and kids. I know those secret phases of her life which have never been revealed, nor will ever be. It's better this way. She's Hindu, but Hindus will never accept her. Or Mansa would never have turned into Sitabo. Rahmatullah says he's going to keep

her as Mansa. That relieves me of a responsibility. If only you could add your blessings. . .'

Chhote Rai couldn't make out what the whole business was about. He only had a vague feeling that Kishen Babu's frail body concealed a huge soul inside it. One touched a button and that soul began to grow larger and larger, like imagination itself.

'Let Bhaskar read it too,' said Bade Rai.'We know this man only because of him.'

Chhote Rai came out and handed the letter to me.

Bhavani knew about the marriage. In fact, he was present at the wedding. The nikāh had been read at Auliya's Mosque. It could have been read at home but Rahmatullah said : 'God's place is my true place.' It was widely believed that an auliya (saint) had once lived there. His miracles still dotted the place.

One day the auliya sat astride a wall, sunning himself. He actually sat astride it, as on horseback, one leg on either side. A police constable from the kotwālī suddenly arrived on the spot and said : 'The kotwāl wants to see you. . .' The auliya spurred the wall the way one spurs a horse. It is said the wall started moving. The constable was flummoxed. He sprinted back to the Kotwāl, who came running. He threw himself to the ground and begged forgiveness of the saint. The auliya laughed : 'It's all in your eyes. I haven't moved at all. Since you called, I thought I'd go and I'd have been there sooner or later. 'That's how the mosque came to be known as the Auliya's Mosque. Mothers and sisters of children suffering from pneumonia or some other uncommon disease would come with their patients and stand at the gates of the mosque. Devotees returning from the *magharib* (evening) prayer would simply blow at the patients with their mouths, irrespective of whether the patients were Hindus or Muslims. It was believed that the air from their mouths cured the children, and that this was one of the auliya's miracles, though the auliya himself had died hundreds of years ago. One could see the mosque from the roof of our haveli.

When I got up in the mornings and looked out of the window,

I saw the blossoms on the neem tree growing in the mosque compound waving in the morning air. Many a time I had a feeling that the *fākhtā* bird singing outside the window came out of that tree and went back into it. There was a woman who ran a handmill nearby and, for a paisa or two, ground rice, wheat, dal, etc. for the people of the neighbourhood. The whirring sound of that mill, like the tiny flowers of the neem, seemed to shower from the tree. There was a story about the *fākhtā* which Bhavani was fond of telling Arun, and which Arun was fond of listening to. It was the story of the bird's separation from her lover. Arun kept asking : 'What happened next? Did the lover come back? Did her sobs reach his ears? One day Bade Rai overheard Bhavani telling Arun the story. He stood concealed and overheard the whole story, but as soon as Bhavani finished Bade Rai took him to task : 'What do you mean by treating young children to such indecent stories? What kind of things do you think they're going to learn from them?' Arun never quite understood what it was that was so indecent about the story of the bird. Bhavani always told us what his mother told him when he was young : 'Children never grow up, and grown-ups never live out their age, till the latter tell and the former hear stories.' But all this wisdom crumbled before Bade Rai's comment.

When I 'broke' the news of Rahmatullah's marriage to Bhavani, he wasn't surprised at all. 'I was there,' he said, 'to partake of the wedding *khajūr*. Kishen Babu was there too. In fact it was he who started the whole thing. He was telling me that he could get me married too while he was about it, if I were willing. But I turned down the offer.'

'Why?'

He laughed. 'Can't serve two masters at the same time. Wasn't that what Hanuman said to the ocean fish : 'I'm a servant of Ram, subordinate to his will; how can I marry you?'

I laughed at his response. He probably misunderstood my laughter. How could Bhaskar Bhaiya laugh at something he had said out of such deliberation and devotion? But he said nothing.

I also changed the topic. I asked him about Rahmatullah's wife. I was naturally curious about her. What was she like? Was

she beautiful? But I couldn't ask him directly: he might misunderstand me. But he told me on his own that she was beautiful and had an attractive manner of talking. 'Is very reverential towards Kishen Babu and touches his feet. She wanted to be married to a Hindu, but Kishen Babu spoke to her and explained things to her: 'Hindu or Muslim— what difference does it make? Where do you think you'll find a Hindu husband? He may be a Musalman, but Rahmatullah has a heart of the purest crystal glass; the deeper you look into it, the purer it will look to you. No Hindu will ever love and respect you so!' And she knew he was right. Both of them are happy now. Rahmatullah never asks her why she keeps fasts; she never asks him why he reads namāz. Since Rahmatullah told her about Bade Rai, she has been repeatedly urging him to take her to the haveli 'only to touch his feet.' Rahmatullah laughs it off and tells her that if Bade Rai gets to know of his marriage 'he'll simply pick up his gun and despatch us in two shots. I've betrayed him. I have no right to show him my face.' But she replies : 'So what if he despatches us in two shots : at his hands death will mean heaven.' Rahmatullah continues his banter : 'Who knows if there's one? And whether they'll let us in there! All that might happen is that we also lose this earth!'

Bhavani said after a while :

'Every jumā night, she goes to the grave of the pīr at the Kachcheri to light a lamp. Last jumā she was there in a burqa. I was there too to light a lamp for the master. She approached me and said : 'I don't know what's come over your brother; he has stopped going to the haveli. Keeps repeating the same thing; How can I show my face there?' If I'd known I'd have refused Kishen Babu.' Always takes her hands to her ears when she talks of him. Then she said : 'I say to him : Take me to Bade Rai. I'll tell him: You're my father. I'll take whatever punishment you want to give us. I'll tell him it was for me that you took this step. I was starving, I wanted food, I couldn't stand the fire in my stomach, so I dragged you into marriage : you're innocent; you gave shelter to one dying in a gutter. . .' but he doesn't listen to me. Come and do something. Make him see reason.'

'Why didn't you tell me this before' I asked Bhavani.

'Rahmatullah had forbidden me. He told me he'd find a way and slip away to some other town.'

Bade Rai called out to Bhavani. He rushed off and left me wondering : Whatever will happen to us if all these people were to make off one after another?

One evening, a messenger entered the haveli with the message that Vir Bahadur, I.C.S., son of Chaudhri Khemraj Singh, wanted to meet Bade Rai urgently. Bade Rai was getting ready for the club, which he had started frequenting again. He postponed his plans. Among the nobility, a certain protocol had then to be observed whenever one went calling. A servant, or a messenger, preceded the visitor and sought permission : 'Mr. So-and-So is desirous of a meeting with the master,' even if the visitor was waiting in a carriage just outside the gate. It was considered impolite to barge into the house. Vir Bahadur was following this convention by sending a messenger in first. Of course, in older days, when he came as a guest with his father, this formality was not considered necessary: they would walk straight into the guest wing of the house from where information was conveyed to the inner reaches of the haveli.

The moment Vir Bahadur entered, he touched Bade Rai's feet, a detail which Bade Rai did not forget till his last breath. Even on his death bed, he often recalled what an ideal son of his father Vir Bahadur had been : 'An I.C.S., and still so humble, so gentle! He touched my feet! Though Vir Bahadur is no more, I can never forget his humility and his grace! May his soul rest in peace! After all, who's perfect in this world?'

Bade Rai embraced him with the greatest affection as if he was meeting a long-lost son. Holding his hand, he conducted him to the sofa. Then he made anxious inquiries about Chaudhri Sahib. Chaudhri Sahib was the first ever Indian Deputy Collector. Next he inquired after his family. Vir Bahadur responded to this inquiry indirectly, since it was considered impolite to talk about one's family to one's elders : 'Actually, that's why Baba doesn't stay with us.

In the village, my brother's kids are such good company to him.

Vir Bahadur launched on the purpose of his visit a little later.

'Chachaji, Krishna Rai Chacha works with me as Tehsildar. Now I have been transferred to Allahabad as Joint Magistrate, and I'll be leaving soon. So far I've kept the lid tightly shut on his case. My Collector, Mr. Richards, has been insisting that I send his papers up. After all, he's an Englishman. What sympathy can we Indians expect from him? I've consulted Baba too. He advised me to talk to you. If you can't do him any good, don't at least cause him any harm, he said. So I've held my hand so far. I've brought the file with me— here it is. You're yourself a magistrate— take a look and tell me what I should do.'

Bade Rai was quiet. No words were exchanged for a few minutes, then Bade Rai spoke :

'The Governor also hinted at it during his visit here.'

Vir Bahadur was taken aback. 'But I was told that the Governor said that he knew full well what I was up to and would take action against me!'

Bade Rai gave him a disappointed look and said :

'Take my word for it; you also mean something to me apart from being Chaudhriji's son. He said nothing of the sort. He did of course tell Krishna Rai a few things. I was astonished that the Governor of such a large state was so well-informed about a lowly Tehsildar. Maybe, I thought, because he's my brother. After all, what's a Tehsildar if not a lowly official? How can a Governor possibly monitor his work?'

'It's possible that the Collector mentioned it to the Home Secretary, and His Excellency remembered because he is your brother. Although it is known that before His Excellency sets out on the tour of a region each departmental secretary briefs him thoroughly on his charge so that he's never caught off-guard.'

As he finished, silence reigned again. It was Vir Bahadur who brokc it :

'What would you have me do, Bade Chacha? I leave today— I was waiting only to see you. When I hand over charge, I also hand over the file. Krishna Rai sahib goes around saying that it

was he who got me transferred. I realize that this'll only work against him. The people here know you and have a great respect for you, but the man who's taking my place is an Englishman, a fresh I.C.S. And a fresh I.C.S. tries to please his bosses back home, not Indians. He has no patience with anyone standing between him and his government.'

'Let me talk to Krishna Rai once.'

'As you think proper. . .'

'If you don't hear from me soon, you can assume I have nothing to say. He has been stubborn all along. Now he's childless and that makes him worse.'

'So are we. . .' said Joint Sahib and laughed.

Leaving, Vir Bahadur touched Bade Rai's feet again.

'May you be happy ever. . . The respect you pay the elders gets its reward from Him. No mere mortal can repay it.'

Vir Bahadur didn't even have tea. He was long gone when Bade Rai still sat thinking about him.

I had just returned from a found of the zamindari. Even before I entered the haveli, the summons arrived : Bade Rai wanted to see me. When I presented myself, he said :

'Go to Majhhale Rai and tell him that I want to see him at once. Bring him with you.' Then he added : 'Vir Bahadur was here yesterday and was asking after you.'

What could possibly be so important that Majhhale Rai had to be called at once, I had no idea. And why did I have to go? Why not a messenger? Bade Rai must have read my mind, because he said : 'I know what you're thinking. It's quite natural; you're a grownup now. And you have a right to know. But the weakneses of elders seize the minds of the young rather quickly and affect the respect the young should have for the elders. So it's best if they don't get to know of their weaknesses. However, let me tell you in brief : Vir Bahadur has been transferred. There are some problems between the two. It's better if they are sorted out now. Vir Bahadur is an I.C.S.; he wants Krishna to offer an apology so that he can sort out the matter before he leaves. But Krishna Rai

is too proud of being a Rai, without being aware of the obligations it imposes on him. The Governor had also hinted at it that day.'

That was one of the very few occasions that I remembered when Bade Rai had spoken to me at such length. It was enough. I left immediately. When I reached Majhhale Chacha's place, he wasn't at home. Majhhale Chachi was, and though slightly on the plump side, she was stunningly beautiful. The moment she was told of my arrival she sent for me immediately. She was leaning on a large bolster, chewing pān without a break. A maid sat by her side, fanning her. She was bejewelled from head to foot, and the jewels seemed to sparkle with life as the air from the fan caused them to sway a little. Majhhale Chachi looked me over once, then called me to her side : 'Come and sit by me, Bhaiyā. How many times have I urged your uncle to take me home so I can take the dust of Jethji's feet and see the children. . . How comforting it is to see you!'

I sat a little away from her. The whole room was awash with fragrance. She immediately called the mahārāj (cook) and instructed him :

'He's Tehsildar sahib's nephew. The food you serve him should be unforgettable. He has eaten the preparations of some of the greatest cooks at his place.' Then she turned to me : 'This cook of ours too has cooked for many princely families. Spends a hundred rupees at each meal. Such varieties of rice! Scores of different ways of preparing the same vegetable— each tastes different!'

'Where's Majhhale Chacha?' I interrupted her.

'Attending the Collector's summons. The scoundrel is after our lives. How do you and your wife manage to live in such style," says the beggar. I ask him : 'Did you bring all this style from your homeland, you ape!' And Vir Bahadur goes along with him! Just think of it— Jethji's nephew in word and a job-snatcher in deed! What does he think— Do we live on the salary? Do we need this pittance? No, thanks, you can keep the job. We lack nothing, we want nothing!'

I held my tongue. She kept up her barrage of words.

'I've heard your previous Majhhali Chachi was a rare beauty.

. died in childbirth.' This startled me, but I still kept quiet. She did not let up.

'My father wasn't in the least willing, but your Chacha went after him. A simple man that he is, my father just couldn't say no. Actually, he didn't want his daughter to marry a widower.'

Why was she telling me all this, and that too on my first visit? I was like a son to her, but she never told me where she was from, who her father was or what he did. Not that I didn't know, but there were little doubts and questions which could do with some clarification. She hadn't stirred once from her cushioned comfort ever since I had come. The fan was going constantly. A slight slack, and she would give a dirty look to the maid, who promptly switched hands and started fanning with renewed vigour.

I suddenly found myself saying :

'Why didn't you come home? Bade Rai had asked Majhhale Chacha specifically the last time he was home.'

'But he tells me Bade Rai may not like it. After all I am a different caste.'

'He wasn't happy, but he wants all of us to pull our weight together. You don't know him. As far as possible, he takes everything on himself.'

She was trying to say something, but is wasn't coming through. I was eager that she should say it before Majhhale Rai came back, since she would not be able to say it then, in fact, may never be able to say it again. But she kept beating around the bush, never coming to the point. I could read it clearly in her face. I tried my best to prod her, but in the end she just clammed up. I knew then that she was far cleverer than the two other Chachis I had known.

It was one-thirty in the afternoon when Majhhale Rai returned. He was bathed in sweat. I noticed that his complexion had darkened somewhat. He had his own coach now. When he saw me he gave a start.

'When did you come?' he asked.

'A little while ago.'

He cast a questioning glance at Chachi. She shook her head

to show that she was still unaware of the purpose of my visit. That relaxed Majhhale Rai a bit. The next question followed almost automatically and quite naturally :

'This is an unexpected visit. I hope everyone is doing fine at home.'

I had an impulse. I thought I would say I had come to see Majhhali Chachi. His questioning glance at Chachi hadn't gone down well with me. But I resisted the impulse— I knew I would be inviting trouble. The Rai brothers, other than Chhote Rai, were known for their temper, specially Majhhale Rai. So I dutifully performed the task that had been assigned to me.

'Bade Rai wants to see you immediately.'

'Immediately? Does he think I'm sitting idle like him?'

His response was instantaneous, and it shook everything I believed in. He went on :

'Must be that son of a bitch Chaudhri! I bet he's been telling things to Bade Rai. He is supposed to be my elder brother, but he listens to them! He thinks that they are right and I am wrong. Always! I'm not born of a Rai if I don't have the job of that bloody Richards crony!'

For the first time, Majhhali Chachi shifted her position on the bolster. She addressed herself to her husband :

'Why are you losing your temper? Go and refresh yourself, have your lunch and offer him lunch too. He's been waiting for you this long!'

Majhhale Rai went inside to change, and took his time. People were careful about their clothes in those days— careful while wearing them and careful when putting them away. Trousers were put in a press. That was a wooden frame with screws on top : you fixed the trousers in it and tightened the screws. I peeped into the room and saw him tightening the screws. For a moment, it seemed to me as if he himself was the trousers, and, of course, he was the tightener of the screws. When he came out, he was wearing a dhoti and wooden sandals. He washed his face and hands and walked off to the kitchen. I was also called there, so I changed and followed suit. Food was served and we started eating. Silently.

Except for the munch-munch that seemed to initiate the process of eating in those days for everyone. Some munch-munched more than others. The food was excellent. When rice was served, it was as if harsingār flowers had been strewn on our platters. Dals were superb. I discovered only later that it was the same dal prepared in three or four different ways. The dry vegetable dishes had silver foil on them, disturbed a little in the process of serving. Such fabulous delicacies were rarely served in private homes. The cook was waiting for compliments from me. Majhhale Rai ate rather mechanically, somewhat lost in himself.

When I was tired of eating, I asked :

'How about Majhhali Chachi? Isn't she going to eat?'

The words 'Majhhali Chachi' startled him. His head turned towards me as if I had said something which had unwittingly jolted him. When he saw me busy eating, he returned to his thālī. But he found it difficult to eat, got up and made straight to his room. I came out into the verandah and caught a glimpse of Chachi eating at a table. When she finished, she too went into the room.

Now it was absolutely still all round. The drone of night insects could be heard in the day, and I felt that but for their sounds the stillness would go unrecognized. Nearly two hours later, Chacha came out dressed. In dresses, his taste matched his elder brother's. Either a suit of jacket-cum-trousers, or an achkan- cum-pajama. In summers, a *chūrīdār* pajama of fine long cloth. A gold chain in a button of the achkan leading to a pocket watch. As he emerged, I stood up.

'You could've rested awhile,' he said.

'Didn't find it necessary,' I said, though I wanted to say a lot besides, His coach arrived, as if by arrangement. His office was about a hundred yards from the house.

'What are my instructions?' I asked.

'I'll try and be there in a day or two.'

'Bade Rai told me to bring you with me.'

'I have to look after this whole tehsil, not just a zamindari with a handful of villages.'

It had the same sting. I kept quiet. The coach drove off.

Chachi had still not emerged from the room. I felt like an outsider in the house. I told the servant that I was going for a stroll around the place and walked off in the direction of Vir Bahadur's bungalow. The memories of my last meeting with bhabhi still teased me; Bade Rai too had instructed me to look them up. I bought a gift of fruit and sweets to take with me. Although I had been to the bungalow once, I couldn't find it now. I had to ask my way there.

Joint Sahib was not at home. I sent in the gifts I had brought and got myself announced. I was called in at once. The moment I saw her, I felt like touching her. She looked the same as she had done the last time— doll-like. The same beauty, the same aura of homeliness. I touched her feet. She touched me on the cheek : 'You've grown up, haven't you? A strapping young man!' And she laughed. 'I thought so much about you, so often. But I don't think you thought of your bhabhi even once. Not that I could do much. He returned yesterday after meeting Bade Rai. Said you weren't at home, probably busy in the zamindari. Bhaskar now does all the work of the zamindari, he said. I knew then you must've grown up. Who are you visiting— the Tehsildar sahib or the Tehsildarni?' Her eyes shone with mischief.

I could only produce an ill-fitting 'Yes'. Personally I had been no less keen to see her.

'How long are you staying?'

'Leaving today. Bade Rai had sent me to fetch Majhhale Chacha, but he's very busy.'

'Come and stay with me for a day or two. I'll look after you with lots of love.'

The word 'love' sent a tingling sensation throughout my body.

'You're blushing,' she said : 'What's the matter? Oh, I see, I talked of 'love,' that's why. Silly! Love and be loved. That way you live forever.' Now she was teasing me. 'Your Chachi is very good-looking too, isn't she?'

It sounded odd to me : 'too'. I'd been told that in such contexts 'too' meant 'two'.

But I just nodded.

'Has she been to seek Bade Rai's blessings yet?'

'No, not yet.'

'I heard she's a different caste— Kayat— it I'm not wrong. Her marriage had all been settled; even the marriage party had arrived, when something happened and the party went back. The Tehsildar Sahib came to her rescue. A man of great guts— I must say.'

Here was more startling news. Majhhali Chachi had mentioned about caste, but had stopped short of mentioning something. This may have been it. The Jointess must have read it in my face, for she at once added :

'Of course, I can't be sure. I've heard it from the servants. Don't mention it to anyone. As it is, Tehsildar Sahib considers your Bhaiya his enemy. Your bhaiya has always been trying to help him. God knows where he gets these strange ideas from.'

I got up to leave. 'I must leave now,' I said,' I've a train to catch.'

'I hope you didn't take it amiss,' she said.

'Take it amiss? From someone who loves me so much?' That word startled me again, and I blushed. Her laughter tinkled again and she said :

'I'll believe you if you come and stay with me sometime. Come to Allahabad : we've been transferred there. Come and see how your Bhabhi entertains you then.'

On our way out she handed me a silver rupee in a silk handkerchief. 'May God be with you,' she said.

I wanted to refuse, but couldn't bring myself to do so, and came out holding it tightly in my fist.

At the gate, I ran into Joint Sahib. 'Bhaskar, aren't you?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'I was with Bade Rai only the day before, You were off at work. . . What brought you here?'

'Bade Rai sent me to fetch Majhhale Chacha home.'

'So?' He was curious.

'He says he'll come in a day or two. He's very busy.'

'As he wishes. It'll be all over here by then.'

A little later, he asked : 'But why are you off already?'

'I have to be back today. Bade Rai will be waiting.'

'Did you meet your bhabhi?'

'Yes.' The rupee in the handkerchief relaxed a little.

'Tell Bade Rai I hand over charge the day after. I did whatever I could to save Krishna Rai. Now it's upto him and fate.'

He heaved a long sigh. I bent to touch his feet, but he held my arms and said 'Don't!'

A storm raged in my mind. I wanted to know why all this was happening, why Bade Rai was behaving the way he was, whether Bhabhi was really a Kayat, whether Bade Rai knew this, what it would do to Bade Rai to know it if he didn't, whether Majhhale Rai had actually planned it knowing what it would do to him (but Bade Rai loved him so much!), and so on. When I reached home Majhhale Rai was back.

'Where were you?' he asked me the moment he saw me.

I wavered for a second : Shall I tell him the truth or no? I decided in favour of the truth.

'At the Joint Sahib's bungalow.'

'That bastard is out to get me and you're socialising with him? How do you expect me to behave towards you then?'

'Bade Rai called you precisely for this— to sort out the misunderstanding and attempt a compromise between you two. .'

'Compromise, my foot! What compromise can he attempt? Has squandered the whole zamindari sucking up to these officers. When his brother wanted a little favour, Bade Rai couldn't bring it to his lips to ask the Governor for Vir Bahadur's transfer! What need do I have for one who can't help me when I need him?'

There was a voice from the wings : 'Will you stop saying all that? Have a thought : my nephew is here on his first visit to me and you greet him with whatever nonsense comes to your head! How's he to blame? He gave you Jethji's message and will go and give yours to him.'

That silenced him. But he came back with another question

after a while :

'What did the Jointess say?'

'Nothing much.'

'Can't believe she won't speak. Hides a poisoned soul behind that pretty face.'

I saw red. My throat choked. I couldn't utter a word. I picked up my things and walked off. No one asked me to stay. The coach followed me but I turned it back.

Bade Rai was sick with suspense. When he saw me coming alone, he became agitated. He came forward to meet me and asked : 'Krishna?'

I just shook my head. Chhote Rai stood close by. He said :

'I told you Majhhale Rai is made of sterner stuff. He won't budge from his position merely in order to decide what's right and what's wrong.'

'But why?'

'Don't you know him?'

I made to go into the house, but he pulled me up short with:

'Where're you going? Why don't you tell us what happened?'

'Does he need to spell it out, Bade Bhaiya?'

'Even so. . .'

I had my mind made up not to tell anything. But then I burst out- – right in front of Bade Rai :

'He said he wasn't sitting idle like you. He said he had a whole tehsil to look after, not a few measly villages. He'll come when he's free, in a day or two.'

Chhote Rai was not a man to get angry, but when he heard this his lips quivered. Bade Rai spoke slowly like a man recovering form a long illness.

'Nothing. . . nothing can stop this barrel of gunpowder from going up now. . .'

Chhote Rai tried to change the topic : 'How's your Chachi?' he asked.

My fury was not yet spent. 'Fine,' I grunted.

He was quick on the uptake. 'All right. Go, have a bath and refresh yourself,' he said.

I went into the house.

'Has taken a direct hit, it seems,' Chhote Rai said in a low voice.

One morning, Chhoti Chachi— why Chhoti, just Chachi is enough, she now being the only Chachi at home— 'waylaid' Bade Rai when he came upstairs for his meal. Rani, my sister, acted as the go-between. From behind the curtain, Chachi transmitted : 'Bhaskar is grown-up. . . we must think of his marriage soon.'

Bade Rai said nothing. The usual pre-meal ablutions over, he took his flat seat on the kitchen floor.

Chhoti Chachi was unhappy. Returning to the room, she asked Rani :

'Was he annoyed?'

'I don't think so. He just kept quiet.'

But Chachi didn't stop worrying. 'I hope he doesn't misunderstand me,' she thought. She avoided talking of such things when Arun was present. She made it a point never to appear worried, or to talk about family matters, in his presence. When Arun was around, Chachi was all fun and laughter. Rani was a different matter. She was now a grown-up girl, and, at least in some matters, a confidant of Chachi. Arun, on the other hand, would literally make a song and dance about any family matters talked about in his presence. And this was a particularly suitable topic for a song and dance sequence.

Chachi was fully conscious that Bade Rai did not like light and irresponsible talk, and he would certainly have objected to this matter being talked about indiscreetly.

She decided, therefore, not to broach the topic again on her own.

A small school, actually just one class,, had been started at the right side of the dīwānkhānā. The moving spirit was Bade Rai, the teacher Khhacheru Mal. All children of the haveli dependants went to this class. The teacher made himself heard over a wide area when teaching— probably he wanted to be heard mainly by

Bade Rai. Arun was a veritable devil in the class. Apart from bullying other children, he also ran rings around the teacher. Sometimes he would sit there squint-eyed, seeing double. 'Which one is my teacher?' he would want to know then. If the teacher spoke sharply to him, the news reached Bade Rai in no time. And he didn't like children being beaten or reprimanded.

A woman teacher had been hired to coach Rani. She taught her music and English. Hindi she learnt from Chachi who knew enough Hindi to be able to teach her. Arun was a great disturbance in Rani's studies. He would put her harmonium out of tune, or demand to be fed in the middle of her lesson, or would provide unsolicited and off-key accompaniment to Rani's musical efforts. Rani cried out to Chachi, Chachi came and shouted at Arun, but Arun was impervious. Then Bhavani or some other stronger force would be requisitioned and Arun would have to be bodily transported to another location. To all this Bade Rai's response would be : 'Which is more important : learning music or bringing up a child?' Sometimes it happened that Chachi was not at home and Rani was by herself. On such occasions the woman teacher would have her day off.

Not that Rani was overloaded with work. For one thing, the place crawled with servants; for another, no one would eat food cooked by an unmarried girl, specially kachchā food. So Arun was her main responsibility. If she found some leisure, it was spent in studies, stitching and embroidery, learning to cook in the kitchen, etc. Bade Rai was opposed to girls learning to sing, specially girls of upper-class families, though once he himself had learnt to play sitar. Chhote Rai had to make a special effort to secure the necessary permission for Rani. Times are changing, he told Bade Rai. Women are joining the war of freedom, shoulder to shoulder with men. If there was one thing that upset Bade Rai, it was this war of freedom. God forbid that this evil spirit should force an entry into this house again!

On his way back from his meal, Bade Rai, on his own, stopped

outside her room and coughed.

'Go and see. Jethji wants to say something,' Chachi prodded Rani.

Coughing was the language of the purdah. And very effective it was.

Rani stood at the door with her head bowed. Girls were not supposed to raise their heads, nor unduly chatter, before their fathers. Bade Rai said :

'Ask your Chachi if she has a girl in mind. . .

Chachi jingled a 'no' with her bangles. Rani translated :

'Chachi says 'No'.'

'Some other reason for raising the matter of Bhaskar's marriage at this point?'

Now Chachi had to speak loudly enough for Bade Rai to hear.

'Rani, tell Jethji, there is no particular reason, but Rani is lonely. A bhabhi for her would make her life more bearable, and maybe she'll also learn new things. Bhabhis are the only windows on the world girls have. Moreover, we haven't had a daughter-in-law in the family for ages. Might also sober Arun up a little bit. A new bahu (daughter-in-law) in the house will be an attraction for him too, someone to stay at home for. And now, at my age, I could also do with some service from a daughter-in- law!'

She said the last sentence somewhat more emphatically and smiled under her veil as she said it.

Bade Rai's face too relaxed a little.

'I hear the new Majhhali bahu is not from our caste,' he said. Or rather blurted out inadvertently.

Chachi said nothing. Rani blushed and couldn't decide whether to stay or flee. Bade Rai quickly realized his faux pas and said to Rani : 'You may go.'

Rani, embarrassed, fled.

Bade Rai resumed after a brief pause :

'I shouldn't have said that before the child. Please, bahu, try and see it doesn't poison her mind. Such incidents often cause children's thinking to go astray : they begin to think : our elders

are doing it, so how can it be wrong? I only wanted to say that after this who'd give my son his daughter's hand in marriage?'

Chhoti Chachi did not speak. She coughed once and gave her bangles another jingle. The way the bangles jingled they somehow communicated the assurance to Bade Rai that she was aware of the delicacy of the situation. The cough indicated that she had really nothing to add to what had been said on the topic.

Bade Rai continued :

'Krishna is our own flesh and blood. What can one say? Stake by stake, picket by picket, our forefathers built this fence around the great name of this family, and he set fire to it! The fence burns before my eyes; I see it going up in smoke, and I can do nothing! I know I can't expect everyone to be like Raghav. . .' He stopped and added after a space :

'It might he better if we let the matter lie low for some time.'

Chachi jogged the door a little and then addressed herself to it :

'What Jethji says is entirely correct, but it may cause problems if we allow the matter time to spread. If we can find a good alliance, it may be a good idea to get the marriage over with before that can happen. Majhhale Jethji is far and away, some know, some don't, and no one knows for sure. Moreover, if you catch your finger in a door, you don't yank the door off and throw it away. You keep both, your fingers and the door, and try for the best.'

Bade Rai gave a low 'H'm' and walked down the steps. Chachi spent the rest of the day doing penance for having overstepped the boundaries of custom and tradition by jabbering away before Jethji. She also mentioned it to Chhote Rai, who laughed and said : 'You're mad, raving mad! So many women are fighting the war of freedom with Gandhiji. If they all thought like you they'd be a very guilt-ridden bunch indeed! When Bade Rai himself sent Rani away, what course of action was open to you?'

Bade Rai also sought the opinion of Chhote Rai. Talking to him, his eyes were moist. He thought of my mother. Had she been alive, Majhhale Rai wouldn't have behaved the way he did. Women have a way of straightening out the emotional angularities of men.

However, the two brothers did succeed in carving out a concensus with regard to my marriage.

It took barely a week from the date Vir Bahadur handed over charge for Majhhale Rai to be suspended from his job. When Bade Rai got to know of it, it was as if he had been struck by a catastrophe. The charge was misuse of official position and accepting illegal gratification. Bade Rai shut himself in his room. That was his usual practice. A slight embarrassment, and Bade Rai stopped going out and meeting people. The town was agog with all kinds of rumours and reactions. Some rejoiced at Bade Rai's discomfiture : 'The sixty-year-old dyed moustache reveals its true colours!' they said. 'Nobility laid threadbare!' said others. Everyone belonging to the Rai family or connected to it, like servants, was subjected to sniggers and sidelong glances. 'How's that for starters!' they seemed to say. It appeared as if the arrest and imprisonment of the entire Rai clan was now only a matter of time, or as if they had all just completed jail terms, or that they had all grown horns, or that they were now all of them a trail of waning moons. . .

A few days later Majhhale Rai paid a sneaking visit home but Bade Rai refused to meet him. He left all the relevant papers and explanations with Chhote Rai and went back pronto. Later Chhote Rai used all his persuasive powers trying to get Bade Rai to change his mind. 'You, and only you, can still save him Overlook his lapses— haven't you so far? Do it one more time!' Bade Rai had to relent. He went and saw the Board Sahib (Senior Member, Board of Revenue). Board Sahib was full of commiserations, but said: 'Considering the status and the services of your family, I can do this for you : Let your brother submit his resignation. I'll see to it that it's accepted and your brother is saved further humiliation.' When Bade Rai put it to Majhhale Rai, he hit the ceiling:

'You'll always listen to what they say, never to what I say! You have always been jealous of my position. I'll never, never resign! I'll have the whole lot of them in jail, no matter what happens!'

Bade Rai was stern :

'The calumny you heap on me, Krishna, only shows the limits of your thinking. You've never tried to overcome those limits, or to look at the beam in you own eye. You never had the right mirror before you in which you could see it. The mirror you have is so small that you can't see anything at all in it. No greater misfortune can befall a man than that he should not be able to see his own foibles. As for me, let me tell you this : if you can put your hand on your heart, and say that these charges are all false and fabricated, I'll stand by you right upto the Privy Council. But if this is not the case, then the only course open to you, if you want to save this family from the final ignominy, is to resign. Don't forget that you're dealing with the British Government. When this government decides that it had had enough, it sees to it that even an innocent man in the dock pleads guilty.'

Bade Rai had finished : he would not say anything more. For the next twenty-four hours, Majhhale Rai apparently looked around for a larger-sized mirror to help him locate the beam in his eye. At the end of the twenty-four hours, he produced his resignation before Bade Rai. The Board Sahib did some wire-pulling and got it accepted. But the finale created an unbridgeable chasm between the two brothers. Majhhale Rai took every opportunity to put it out that he had to resign because Hari Rai had been jealous of his success and had conspired with others to secure his resignation. If Bade Rai had wished, no one could have dared to touch him and he would have been a Deputy Collector some day, maybe even a Collector. But Bade Rai simply couldn't bear to see him rise so high in life.

Every time he heard it, Bade Rai swallowed the comment like another sip from a cup of poison.

It was against this background that I, Bhaskar Rai, made my entry into the world of youth. The war of freedom too had made good progress, but it's not my purpose to talk about that war here. The Rai family never had much to do with it, except for Chhote Rai's passing flirtation. For others, the country was limited to Bade Rai.

Looking back, I cannot help feeling how our own blinkers demagnify the most momentous issues to diminutive proportions, and cover them with a patina of truth. Had the country not become independent, even in this old age I would still be nursing the same old blinkers. I must thank my son, Raghubar, who, in time and out of it, acted as my friend, my philosopher, and call it so if you will, my guide.

Bade Rai had lost one of his arms. Now he was trying to build me up as another strong arm in place of the lost one. His idea of strength was his own. You draw strength from yourself, not from others. You draw strength from the good deeds you have done, and from the capacity for thought you possess. But things were not so clear then. . . Good or bad, Majhhale Rai had at least succeeded in establishing an identity of his own. The battle for my marriage was on. I often got the impression that my marriage was a fortress which the Rai family wanted to force into surrender, and which therefore it had laid siege to. In the whole business of this siege, I was a mere pawn to be pushed up front while the remaining forces crept up behind me to storm the citadel.

Finally the marriage was settled. As the bridegroom, I became a special person, so special that for once I began to feel unrivalled by any other. For some time, I now feel ashamed to admit, even Bade Rai had ceased to exist for me. I was everywhere. The time had finally come when the person who held the key to all my dreams was to come riding on high, borne on wings, and unlock that secret and priceless treasure about which only whispered clues had so far reached my ears. Now I know that my son Raghubar too must have felt the same way, give or take a few matters of detail; his son too will also perhaps feel the same way, and so on down the line. They'll all start with the confidence that marriage is the key that unlocks a priceless treasure of which even the biggest jeweller in the land cannot accurately estimate the worth.

Strange were the goings-on that preceded the final word about my marriage. While inquiries from the prospective brides' parties were still coming, a rumour ran through the town that Bade Rai

had cast his brother out because he had married against his wishes. While this rumour set me on edge, Bade Rai was cool towards it. His only comment was that tongues had begun to wag too much. But this rumour did loosen up the flow of inquiries which had become somewhat constricted earlier. The incoming offers,however, didn't quite measure up to the Rai benchmark. For a century and a half, only Jagirdars and Talukdars had their daughters accepted into our family. The present needs were, however, different. . . The family of Rais needed a girl who could take charge of the family and could hold it together. A family, in this respect, is like a country. They run a comparable course. If you like, you can reverse the simile. A country needs a charismatic hero, or a charismatic heroine, to save it when it is falling apart. So does a family. And this family needed just such a heroine at this point of time. There was, of course, Chachi, but, for one thing, she was a somewhat lonely figure with no one of the right stature to assist her, and, for another, she did fall somewhat outside the mainstream. As far as the bridegroom, that's me, was concerned, one factor weighed strongly in my favour. I was singlehandedly and independently managing the whole zamindari. Despite its shrinking borders, our zamindari still spanned extensive areas on the *Patwārī's* maps. The name of Bade Rai was still golden currency in the whole region. There was of course no question of boy meeting girl, or even of setting eyes on each other. That was considered against all moral, material and practical values of the society. It was like a lottery, or betting, which had then recently gained popularity. You betted on a number. It the number turned up in the draw, you hit the jackpot; if it didn't, you lost whatever you had betted. That seemed to be happening to me too : jackpot or bust! And it did actually happen. An offer from Rothak was accepted. Her father, Anantramji, was a lawyer. This was my first marriage. I had more later. I'll speak of them at the appropriate time. I mention the fact here because I do not wish any misconceptions to take root about my marriages.

The wedding itself was a grand affair. The barāt (bridegroom's party) looked like an army regiment in transit : wagons, horse carriages, caparisoned horses, ornamental parasols, bolsters with

golden embroidery on them, even two elephants. A possé of armed guards accompanied the barāt. The barāt camped on the way at night. Tents were pegged and tepees were set up. Fires and gas lamps lighted the whole area. Guard was mounted. The whole scene resembled an army establishment. Land was mortgaged and loans raised freely to finance the show. No expense was spared and no accounts kept.

Majhhale Rai was at first reluctant to join the barāt. Later he yielded to pressure from relatives and friends. In addition to his usual complaints, he expressed fear that Majhhali Chachi may not receive the respect due to a daughter-in-law of the family. So he agreed on the condition that she would be treated in a manner befitting one. Chhoti Chachi went personally to receive her. The only restriction that remained in place was that she couldn't enter the cooking area for 'raw' food. This was a restriction she herself appreciated. Majhhale Rai himself would not eat 'raw' food if touched by her. She, in fact, used to take him to task for it : 'It's OK if you lick my face, it's Ok if you caress my body, but if I touch your food, it's damnation! Pah! "He could only laugh. Chhoti Chachi used a different approach. . . The moment Majhhali Chachi made to get up to get or do something, she forestalled her with 'You may be younger in age, but you are definitely the senior bahu. And this is your first visit here, while I've been enjoying the daughter-in-law status for years. I simply cannot let you trouble yourself while I'm around. It'll be *seniorés priorés* here, but *seniorés* by age. Just think what Majhhale and Bade Jethji will say! Do you think I'll let Bhaskar's bahu work when she steps into this house the first time? You may well be my Jithānī, but this is your first entry into the Rai haveli as a bahu.'

But there were visiting relatives, distinguished and senior visiting relatives, who did not let pass any opportunity to make snide remarks. The Chhoti Chachi would apologize on their behalf. Occasion permitting, she would also try to explain things to them. Majhhali Chachi was overwhelmed by the warmth of her hospitality, but she wasn't quite at home : the feeling of being an outsider persisted. Time and again she felt it was possibly her caste which stood in the way of her total acceptance, but she didn't let matters rise to the boiling point on that score.

Vakil Sahib— the bride's father— too, on his part spared no efforts to make the barāt feel welcome : the reception left nothing to be desired. There was only one snag. It was customary then to display the dowry at the time of the bidāī, or the parting of the barāt. In some places it continues to be the practice today too. People from both sides watched the display. The display used to be bigger than the actual dowry, but Vakil Sahib overdid things. The gold and the jewellery displayed in the dowry befitted a small prince. Bade Rai did get a bit suspicious, but he said nothing. When the dowry was opened after the barāt returned home, gold was only fifty tolās. When the bride got to know of this, she had a fit of crying. Women have a special propensity : work can wait, but any opportunity to pass a comment won't! Chhoti Chachi was placatory : 'Don't dishearten yourself, Bahu. It makes no difference; there's enough here of everything; for us you are the real gold, the Lakshmi herself. With you, we want nothing, we lack nothing.' But the convulsions continued. At night she got an unstoppable fit of coughing. She refused to see a doctor; instead she took out her own medicine. This was something we found out later. We had all along been thinking that these were problems of adjustment to a new place, and possibly homesickness. I myself had never seen anyone before in such a condition. Watching her convulsed with coughs, I became worried. When I could stand it no more, I went out of the room. I have never been able to forget the forlorn look she gave me as I left the room. Bade Rai had been informed and he was upset too. Majhhale Rai and Chhote Rai were with him. Majhhale Rai would soon be going back to his house— after his resignation he had moved back though not into the haveli. He had established himself in a part of the kothi in Gahara Baag which had served as the guest house for officers. It was also known as the Vilayati Guest House. He had taken possession of its rear portion.

Majhhale Rai was overly worried by this development : 'Is this the destiny of the Rai clan?' he wondered. Two of the brothers were already childless, now the line of Bade Rai was also threatening to dry up. Are Bhaskar and Arun the last of the Rais? Chhote Rai was lost in himself. Eyes closed, he seemed to be carrying on

dialogue within himself. I didn't quite grasp the reason for his unhappiness then, but I did later, much later, when I had a family of my own, and was visited often by sickness and defeat.

Barely two days later, my wife's brother arrived to escort her back to her parents' house. His name was Vishwanath, but he was better known as Raja Babu. He was studying law, and was aspiring to become a lawyer like his father. Actually, my father-in-law was not a lawyer but a mukhtār. Only mukhtārs were taken to be lawyers in those days. In fact, their knowledge of law was better than that of the lawyers. Precedents were on their fingertips. The only problem was that they had no access to the High Court. Raja Babu's sister, that is, my wife, was called Rupwati, or Rupa. Rupa was beautiful, but lean, thin and anemic. The only time I saw her was that night, when she had the coughing fit. It was as if the very sight of me had brought it on. Immediately, I received word from Bade Rai, through Chhote Rai, that I must on no account go near her. Rupa must have been sixteen or seventeen then. Bade Rai's decision hurt me deeply but there was no question then of giving preference to your wife's wishes over the wishes of your èlders in the family.

Her brother stayed for a couple of days. When he was informed of Rupa's coughing fit, subsequent fever and unwillingness to see a doctor, he was upset, and wanted to go back to Rohtak at once. He started giving all kinds of excuses : father has to go out and has instructed him to be back with Rupa without delay; there was a wedding in māmā's house and Rupa must go there, and so on. Bade Rai allowed her to leave. Almost everyone to a man advised Bade Rai not to send so much gold and silver with bahu, but Bade Rai wouldn't listen. 'Do you think a Rai bahu would go to her *pīhar* like a pauper?' he argued. Rupa cried a lot as she was leaving, which struck everyone as very peculiar. For a bride to cry when going to her *pīhar* was the height of shamelessness. Then, not now. It is exactly the opposite now.

With the departure of the bride, Majhhale Rai too left for his kothi. Bade Rai tried to persuade him to stay on at the haveli : 'The respect you get is not the same staying at the Gahara Baag

Kothi,' he said. But Majhhale Rai was quite certain : 'Neither I nor your bahu will feel quite at home here. . .

'Why? All these days did you or your bahu for once feel slighted here?'

'No, but there are restrictions. . .

'No more than you yourself observe at home, I understand.'

Chhote Rai, who had been keeping quiet so far, now joined in :

'For God's sake, Majhhale Bhaiya! If you observe the same restrictions, it's all love and romance; if we do, it's hate and humiliation! I don't believe in the caste business— I believe humanity matters more— but. . .

That, of course, didn't stop Majhhale Rai. Bade Rai also thought better of it and didn't insist.

Kishen Babu also attended the wedding. Seeing me gave him an emotional relapse. He caressed my cheeks, which I didn't much care for. Wherever his fingers touched me, I felt the skin shrivel up. It isn't quite right to say that human skin is less or more sensitive that cow or horse skin. One may not be able to see it with the naked eye, but the subject can always feel where and when the skin shrinks. I was reminded of the caressing touch of the Jointess. How soothing and nice that was! Her touch had suffused my body with an unexpressed emotion.

Kishen Babu stayed with Rahmatullah, which Bade Rai didn't like. After all he was here as his guest! Rahmatullah also tried to make him see reason : 'Please, Kishen Babu, don't embarrass me! He'll feel insulted. After all, I'm his vassal.' But Kishen Babu was unmoved and said : 'Look, my real name is Krishna. Kishen is what they call me! Kishen has many meanings and this is one of them,' and he laughed. I also tried : 'Krishna Babu,' I said, Bade Rai has such high regard for you. And he has been so annoyed with Rahmatullah. But when you wrote that letter to Bade Rai, he sent a silver choker for his wife, grain, a hunk of gur and cash. And now you are out to insult him?'

Kishen Babu was still laughing; 'Look, Bhaskar, you're my

weakness; Bade Rai is my strength. One surrenders not to one's strength, but to one's weakness. He's a great and distinguished man. I stand nowhere before him. I earn my living by hawking cigarettes and matches. Won't I insult him by staying with him? Rahmatullah is like me. If I stay with him, I'll not be constantly reminded of my lowly status; he, on the other hand, will have the satisfaction that I acknowledged his regard for me.' After a pause, he continued in the same vein : 'I have had the occasion to live above my station and I know. If you want to discard your own roots and draw sustenance from the roots of others, you can do so only if you become a parasite, like a creeper. You throw it anywhere, and it will grow and flourish. I am not a parasite. This is my own ground; I'd forsaken my ground and I thought I was happy, but that was borrowed happiness. This happiness is my own happiness. I urge you, Bhaskar, to respect my new-found independence, and I will respect your independence— that's the way to a happy relationship. If I have to sacrifice my independence for you, how can I count you my friend?'

I could say nothing. He seemed to be quite illogical and muddled, but the way he spoke, it seemed to me that he was holding a dialogue not with me but with my soul.

Rahmatullah's wife was also pleased to have Kishen Babu as a guest. For my wedding, she presented me with a kurtā of embroidered muslin, stitched with her own hands. For the bride, she sent a plaited band, with gold embroidery, to be woven in the hair. She had done wonders for Rahmatullah's business because of her skills at hand-stitching, embroidery, gold and silver thread work, and making kurtās. Rahmatullah's shop was now famous for kurtā. Every well-to-do person in town had to have a kurtās stitched at Rahmatullah's. At a time when every tailor charged four annas for a kurtā, Rahmatullah charged eight : four for himself, four for his wife.

Rahmatullah too joined the barāt as a member of the bridegroom's party. Like everyone else in the party, he too received

the *supārī*. It was a custom to distribute *supārīs* to the barātīs; this was really a way of counting their number. The barātīs had been put up in six bungalows. Vakil Sahib did not have to take much trouble on furnishing and decorating the bungalows as we carried most of the paraphernalia with us : durrees, carpets, bolsters, tepees, tassels, utensils, and so on and on.

Rahmatullah had also arranged for a nautch (mujrā) on the sly. He had the support of Kishen Babu and a few of our relatives in this venture. The courtesan in attendance was the famous Rampurwālī. She was a striking beauty and a fabulous dancer to boot. Kishen Babu had been handed a bagful of money to spend as he pleased. And, of course, I had all the resources of a bridegroom. That night both the bride's and the bridegroom's parties enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Barātīs then used to stay at the bride's place for as long as a week. Kishen Babu used to say that a good and well-entertained barāt could tone up your body for a whole year, and if a nautch was also thrown in, well, what more could one ask for? The heart grew younger by a year. Of course, Kishen Babu had given up drinking and was no longer the eater he once used to be. Eat, he was now in the habit of saying, only as much as you can afford. But he was fond of dance. Watching him watch the dance one could espy in him the attitude of one watching ripe mangoes sway in the wind in a garden that belonged to someone else. Only his opium still stayed with him. On his giving up drinking, his comment was : 'It's a drink of the gods, the *Somras* you know. Man cannot afford it. Because it's the gods who drink it, their feet are always in the air, What'll happen to man if both his feet are in the air? Won't he fall flat? I've been a god. Now I only want to be a common man. Opium is a friend of the common man : a couple of annas' worth is enough. And, because it comes from leaves and flowers, you feel closer to it than to liquor, the high-flying daughter of grapes. You can never be certain when and where you may hit the high with her. Know your bounds, I say, and stay within them : that way no one can ever throw you out.' Strange were the things that Kishen Babu said, and they made me feel very uneasy. To me his statements always seemed a bit too fine

and too clever by half.

Every morning during his stay in town, Kishen Babu would turn up at Rahmatullah's shop, and stay there for the whole day. Occasionally, he also came into the haveli. Bade Rai was completely mystified by his behaviour. How could one who had never allowed a single fold in his dresses, except the ones that were dictated by fashion, suddenly change so completely? How can you change the outer appearance so much without changing the inner reality? And the inner reality is not something that can change its colours like a chameleon! Then how did it all come about? But he could never ask him this question. Chhote Rai of course did, when in a chummy mood : 'Come on, Kishen Sahai, tell us all about it. From a playboy to a pauper. . . from riches to rags. . . Doesn't quite jell.'

He just laughed : 'From a playboy of the body to a playboy of the spirit!' Your playboy comes into his true colours when he knows he's defeated.'

'What I call my playboy spirit,' he continued, still laughing, 'is the couldn't-case-less-even-if-I-starve spirit. One who has this playboy spirit needs have no other. My own family knows it only too well. I was lost to it for some time, but it has found me again. My wife is lost in the contemplation of God, I am lost in my wife and my kids. Sometimes I play a pupil to my wife— thus getting the best of both the worlds. Of course, while I'm here I'm hitting the highs— but once I'm home I'll hit a few lows and square the accounts. They, poor chaps, of course hit neither any highs nor any lows.'

Kishen Babu had turned into a talking machine without an off button. But everything he said seemed to have been scraped from the bottom of his heart. Perhaps that was his only gratification. He continued :

'Chhote Chacha (sometimes that's how he referred to Chhote Rai), only those who have lived that pleasure know it. Scarcity binds the people of a family together; everyone tries to console the other and to put heart into each other. That's when you feel you are together. Even the death of the closest relative doesn't give you that feeling. Not to have anything, yet to live on in the hope

of having it, to live on for years and years— is there a spirituality greater than this? There's no hope in the world above this hope. When I had everything I had no hope : only the fear that I may lose everything. But let me not bore you with this tale. This is the saga of a fakir, which never ends, nor ever will. His homelessness is his wealth. His poverty is an asset that's never consumed. All other assets are— be they material or spiritual. Here today, gone tomorrow. I look back on those days, and I say : 'I was poor then, and I am rich now; I was afraid then, but I fear not now. I consume now what I get; then I consumed what I hadn't got, and made a thorough job of it too.'

Chhote Rai was listening with rapt attention and moist eyes, as if to a preacher. 'I wonder if you too have come under the mahātmā's magic.' He said and gave a laugh.

'Heaven forbid! Me and the Mahātmā? A soul of sin against a soul of virtue! He carries the sorrows of the world; I carry my sorrows to the world!'

Chhote Rai was a little befuddled. 'I didn't quite get it,' he said.

'There's nothing to get,' he said. 'The mahātmā has nothing to lose— in his own way; I too have nothing to lose— in my own way. Neither of us has anything to lose : only the ways are different.'

Chhote Rai didn't know what to say. For a while, he just continued to sit there.

When Kishen Babu returned home after a week, he was given lots goodies to take home, which, we later learnt, he left at Rahmatullah's. It was a custom to give gifts of dresses, eatables, utensils, etc. to relatives at weddings. It was Rahmatullah who told this to Bhavani. He had wanted to now from Kishen Babu what he was to do with the things. He had himself received a big packet of goodies from the haveli. If he went and returned them to the haveli, Bade Rai would be unhappy. But Kishen Babu had said : 'I don't mind taking them, but why raise expectations? We have adjusted ourselves to our circumstances and the circumstances have adjusted themselves to us : we're now fitted in our niche like a heavy stone falling on wet sand and settling snugly in. I have no

wish to disturb that cosy arrangement.' And when I asked him what I should do with the things, he simply said, 'Give them away to the handicapped.' I never revealed Bhavani's revelations to anyone, and also forbade him to do so.

A letter was received from him a few days later which had the same undercurrent : 'I've acquired riches which are available to everyone in the world yet everyone swaps them for the rags of misery. When you acquire the riches that I have, you wish for no more— for there is no more to wish for. My wife and kids simply love it. Sometimes they're troubled by doubts, but I set their doubts at rest. 'You want to go there, but I've been there and back,' I tell them. 'What you'll get here will be your own. you'll be content to get it and it'll free you from all craving. What you'll get there will only sharpen your craving for more. To get this more, you'll rob others, and you'll go on robbing others. Then a day will come when there'll be no one left to rob, or there'll appear on the scene a bigger robber than you— what will you do then? I'm not sure if they get my meaning, but I have a feeling that, at least for the time, they do.

'I've given up opium. One day, actually for several days, there was no opium to be had. I wandered off into the forest. That was the day of my darkest despair. You are face to face with such despair when you enslave yourself to something, and allow yourself to be dragged by it— like the people who were dragged, tied to horses, by tyrants in olden days. I suddenly saw a snake crawling into its hole. I was so crazed by my craving for opium that I thrust my hand into that hole. Probably the snake bit me, I'm not sure, but I did feel it crawling up my arm. I had fallen unconscious. When I came to, I felt as if I had taken half a dose at one go, so far gone I was. I haven't had so much opium for years. When I got up to go, I saw the snake lying by my side. I raised my foot to kick at it, but the foot had no feeling at all. I had no control over my limbs. The snake, however, was dead. Perhaps the poison in my body had killed it. Then I wittily thought maybe even a snake cannot escape the poison of poverty. But, of course, I was wrong. The whole world has escaped it. But anyway, my own

problem had been taken care of. Now whenever the urge hits me, I take to the forest in search of my prey. I get my high and there is one snake less in the world! Sometimes it does seem to me that there are more snakes than men in the world. At other times, I am inclined to include men too among the snakes.'

I read out this letter to Rahmatullah. He didn't understand what it was all about, but was sad that Kishen Babu maybe beginning to lose his sanity. When I told Chhote Rai, he too was worried. His analysis was that Kishen Babu had taken the loss of the court cases and the property to heart, and he was now disintegrating. To provide himself with a sense of security, he was now busy nesting himself into the hollow of poverty.

Bade Rai sent some more goodies to Kishen Babu's home through a messenger. He had found out about the fate of the previous lot. Once again Kishen Babu returned them with a letter to me :

It seems you let Bade Rai see my letter. I'd written it to unburden myself to one whom I hold dearer than my own life. Love knows no logic, like poverty. One must try and understand both. A snake bites me. I get high, but I do not die. If man can pass on his poison to the snake, the snake dies. I'm a living example. My sting is now sharp and poisonous. Not like the past when any passing snake could put his fangs on me.

I am aware that in sending me these gifts Bade Rai has been true to his nobility, but it so happens that in my territory my own nobility bows to no one else's. It's a clash of two giants. You are responsible for creating this clash, and must therefore also bear the responsibility for ending it. I'm returning the gifts. You know that I didn't bring the earlier lot with me either. After all, how long would these things last? The dependence they'd produce would, however, last a long time. Bad habits take only a few days to form, though kicking them may well take years. I don't speak without experience. So much so, in fact, that the cursed things even cock a snook at good habits of the longest standing. Since

Bade Rai has made up his mind that I must receive the gifts, please have them distributed to those wretches who are bound to beggary, for whom beggary is a blackhole they're mortally afraid to be in, and who cower in their corners rather than stand up and fight. For me, in my fight, what greater weapon can I think of than this?

My greetings to Rahmatullah, and to Sitabo. Relations do not take long to change. These two are living examples of how the least regarded people can be raised in the scale of honour. That is, if there's such a thing as honour. Take a mirror. Turn it upside down. The image is the same. Turn it the right side up. It is still the same, isn't it? Used as we are, however, to one way of looking at it, we believe that's the only right way. Don't you agree?

I was in two minds. Finally I handed over the letter to Bade Rai. He read it, looked at the sky and muttered : 'Strange man! Getting stranger day by day!'

Majhhali Chachi was putting on more weight everyday. Her life-style had seen no change. Her cook, the one who had catered to me during my visit, had come with her. Majhhale Rai looked after his zamindari himself, and did it very efficiently too. It was rumoured about him that he counted every grain of wheat, and kept count of even the number of grains picked by birds. None of the loans he gave remained uncollected, and none that he took were ever repaid. His entertainment expenses were zero. If a guest happened to drop in, he had to answer a formal inquiry whether he had his meal or whether he would like one to be got ready. This was completely contrary to the norms of hospitality current then. He had also brought his coach along with him, which was a sore point with Bade Rai : 'A regiment of coaches and horses in the house, and he goes and brings his own coach!' Secondly, Bade Rai used the criterion of hospitality to judge one's gentlemanliness. All things considered, he had concluded that the distance between them was on the rise, and the walls dividing them

were growing taller everyday.

Bade Rai sometimes sent me to Majhhale Rai's place. Arun went frequently escorted by Bhavani or some other servant. Parties in the Gahara Baag had ceased since Majhhale Rai occupied a portion of it. Borne on litters, Chachi and Rani too had paid them visits. Strictly speaking, they were not litters since they were not shoulder-borne. They were really buggies shaped like litters and drawn by horses. Bade Rai did not like to be borne on human shoulders. The conveyance was closed on all sides, with flower-designs cut on the sides for air. The designs were covered with netting. When womenfolk had to go out, the buggy was backed up against the doorstep. The passengers entered from the rear and when they had settled down, the doors of the litter-buggies were closed. Chhote Rai hated the restrictions placed on women. Are they cattle that they should be packed into carriages like goods for transportation, he used to ask. Or are they cats and rabbits ready to jump into the lap of the first man they see? But he didn't have the courage to say this to Bade Rai, and he couldn't stop women being packed like cattle in the litter-buggies.

Whenever I went calling on Majhhale Rai at his Gahara Baag kothi, he would make inquiries about Bade Rai or Chhote Rai, but in a way which always put me off. He would ask not how his elder brother or Raghav was, but how my father or my real Chhote Chacha was. Arun had taken a dislike for Majhhali Chachi. Majhhale Rai still managed to indulge in a bit of play and games with Arun, but Majhhali Chachi treated him as an outsider, an unwanted interloper in the house. On one occasion, she even pushed him and he was injured in the hand. Then she cried and cried as if her own child had been injured by someone else. Women used tears as a potent weapon then; they do so even now. Arun went around crying that Majhhali Chachi had pushed and hit him. Majhhale Chacha at once grasped the situation. He took Arun personally to the haveli and explained to Chhote Rai that Majhhali Bhabhi had inadvertently pushed Arun. Bade Rai overheard it but didn't speak. He was afraid matters would get out of hand. If the relationship had been normal he would have surely taken someone

to task. But since that day he never asked anyone to call on Majhhale Rai, though he never stopped anyone from doing so either.

Majhhale Rai was also getting tough with the tenants in the zamindari. On a few occasions, he had had their fields ploughed forcibly : he wanted to raise his own crop there. When the tenants objected, he got the land transferred to his own name at half or three-quarters of the price. If the tenant wasn't agreeable, he got him beaten up or thrown out of the village with hands and feet tied. The tenants came to Bade Rai in piteous appeal. At first Bade Rai couldn't decide what action to take. Then he despatched me to get Majhhale Rai. He could've sent a messenger, but he wanted to be sure that Majhhale Rai didn't turn down the summons. He had done so before. The moment I told Majhhale Rai the message, he knew what was what. He certainly was an intelligent man!

He was pacing the long platform in front of the kothi when I reached there.

'What does he want with me?' he asked when I gave him the message. Then he named a few tenants and asked : 'Have they been to see him?' And then suddenly he started groaning : 'I'm not well. I'll come as soon as I get well.'

When I told Bade Rai everything he pondered for a while, then said :

'If he's not well I think I should go and see him.'

He was dressed in kurtā-dhotī and was wearing pump shoes. Unmindful of his appearance, he took off down the road to Majhhale Rai's place. This was going to be his first visit to the place since Majhhale Rai had moved into it, hough it is possible that he had paid a couple of supervisory visits there before. When he saw Bade Rai going on foot, Rahmatullah jumped up from his seat in the shop and shadowed him. It was very unusual for Bade Rai to be seen walking. Even more so in kurtā and dhotī. He was walking at great speed. People fell away to either side of the road and gave him a low salute. He raised his hand in acceptance. Rahmatullah maintained a respectable distance. When Majhhale Rai saw Bade Rai, he was almost in a panic. Seeing Bade Rai arrive so promptly, and in such an outfit, he was totally at a loss to understand what

was happening.

'Bhaskar told me you weren't well. How are you now? Earlier we didn't need to ask. Staying together, we knew.' Bade Rai said.

Majhhale Rai didn't know what to say. 'Bodyache,' he blurted out.

'You should be more careful. Sometimes the pain may not actually be there, but one feels it. Shall I send for a doctor?'.

'No, no, I'll call on him myself.'

Bade Rai walked around the kothi. Majhhale Rai had gradually extended his occupancy to the entire kothi. The parts which were meant to be guest rooms for sahibs had also been requisitioned. Bade Rai took a round of the kothi and came back to the platform in the front. The platform was co-extensive with the kothi and ran all around it. Whole parties and musical evenings were held on this platform, though of late the tradition had died out.

'You seem to have become an expert grabber,' said Bade Rai.

'I. . . I. . . didn't quite understand,' Majhhale Rai stammered.

Bade Rai let his eyes travel over the entire expanse of the kothi and said : 'Some tenants have complaints about their fields.'

Majhhale Rai started shouting :

'Scoundrels! Bastards! Bloody sons of bitches! They were digging ditches around the fields to block the path!'

'That's a wrong thing to do. but I hear you got their fields dug up. And got them beaten up too!'

'That'll knock some sense into their thick heads.'

'Must be eminently sensible by now, mustn't they?'

Majhhale Rai either didn't understand or pretended not to.

Bade Rai continued :

'What do you think they're going to eat?'

'Not my responsibility,' he said.

'Krishna, what's wrong with you? Why are you doing all this? For whom? God has given you enough to feed and clothe a dozen people, and still you could live in style! Why are you inviting the curse of these poor and defenseless people? It's not water that goes and joins the clouds, it's the vapour. And sometimes the vapours turn into so much rain that everything is washed away.'

'Bade Rai, are you going to side with them against me? As for your question who I'm doing it for, so long as we are alive, I'm doing it for ourselves. After we're dead, whosoever inherits it will enjoy its fruits.'

'But they're our subjects. It's our duty to sympathise with them in their sorrow. After all, all this fancy living of ours we owe to them, don't we?'

'If they're your subjects, that's your problem. I don't consider them my subjects. I think it's everyone for himself and devil take the hindmost.'

Bade Rai received the first shock when he heard himself addressed as 'Bade Rai'. The dialogue that followed cut him to the quick. 'Krishna,' he said, 'you want to snatch away the bread from the mouths of the poor the way you have snatched this kothi away from me. I advise you not to do it. Call me Rai, if you like, or call me what you will, I'm still your elder brother, the brother who brought you up. There's a limit to which tyranny can go : you touch someone's bread or you touch someone's daughter. . . even the worm turns.'

Bade Rai was standing. Majhhale Rai had not offered him a seat. Majhhali Chachi, concealed behind a door, was trying to attract his attention, but he ignored her and said to Bade Rai :

'Everyone does it, but in his own special way. First you forced yourself on this kothi, now it's my turn. After all where did the money to build it come from, if not from the zamindari?'

Bade Rai was descending the steps :

'We'll talk about the kothi later. For the present, give them their fields back. You'll earn their blessings. They are the very poor. By robbing them which hell do you want to push them into? They are at the very bottom of the ladder— there's nothing but death below them. Of course, it's at the very top too.'

'They will be better off there.'

Bade Rai wheeled around and muttered very softly :

'Everyone's better off there, equally.'

Bade Rai took the remaining steps very quickly. Rahmatullah was standing at some distance, watching and listening. He rubbed

his eyes and resumed his job as a shadow.

Majhhali Chachi now entered the scene :

'You didn't even offer Jethji a seat!'

'I don't offer seats to my enemies. He was here to pick up a fight.'

'What's this you're saying? Everyone's going to say I put you up to it.'

'I've said and done what I had to say and do. You're siding with those who have nothing but hatred for you. I can't do that. Anyone who hates me gets only hate in return. Not only him, but his dogs too.'

Majhhali Chachi beat a hasty retreat into the house.

There was no word of Rupa. Bade Rai was worried, though he never said anything. Vakil Sahib hadn't cared to drop a letter or send any message. A messenger went a couple of times but returned empty-handed. Rupa was either away at her māmā's, or was visiting her *buā*. Bade Rai was suspicious of these excuses, and his worry mounted. Then one day Chhote Rai called me to say that Bade Rai wanted me to go and fetch 'the bahu.' I thought this strange. Bade Rai himself had found it embarrassing to speak to me directly on this matter, and he expected me to go there and tell them to their face : 'I am here to take Rupa. Prepare for her departure!' To land there without any intimation or letter— what'd they think! Chhote Rai laughed and said :

'Bhaskar, if you don't worry about your wife, who will? The proposal should in fact have come from you, but, here you are, fighting shy of the proposal even when others have taken it upon themselves to make it! Do you realize it's your wife we are talking about, not ours? In our own days, we used to make secret trips to our wives.' Then he became serious :

'Being husband and wife is nothing to be ashamed of; leaving your wife at the mercy of others certainly is. You must learn to treat it as relationship that commands respect and honour; if you can't, the relationship has no relevance. It's reduced to mutual tolerance. I must say Majhhale Bhaiya scores over all of us in this

matter. His attitude is correct and responsible. When he wanted to marry, he didn't wait for anyone's approval; he simply went ahead. And he hasn't turned his back on his responsibility. I admire him for this. What, however, takes away from this admiration is the way he treated the first Majhhali Bhabhi. When I think of the excesses he subjected her to, I hang my head and can look up to him no more. I must say my own treatment of Chhoti Chachi is not what it should be, but I do confer on her the respect that's her due. Bade Bhaiya himself treated Badi Bhabhi more as a dignified ayah than as a wife, but she was a mother to all of us. Bhaskar, you must not look upon women merely as begetters of your progeny. They're gifted with an inner vision which can look through you, yet they reveal nothing. If she decides to have her revenge, she turns upon herself. That was what Majhhali Bhabhi did.'

Chhote Rai thought a little, then resumed :

'Their only weakness is that they can't suffer neglect from their husbands, and that's what the husbands take advantage of, turning the neglect into a conscious weapon. Except for this, there is nothing in respect of which a man may measure up to a woman— be it forbearance, mercy, sacrifice, love. . . yet a man dies, and for his wife the whole world becomes dark; a woman dies and for her husband there are many new worlds to explore! Our sister was widowed at thirteen. Do you know what became of her? The thousand, tens of thousand, and hundreds of thousand moments she lived thereafter, she died each one of those moments! I'm telling you all this to caution you : don't treat a woman merely as one whose only job is to bring forth children, to bring them up and to give you love, while you remain free to do whatever you like. We've all been together perpetrators of a female genocide, murderers of feminine honour— for God's sake, don't follow us in this!'

He was agitated. He had to stop speaking in order to control himself. Then he patted me on the back and said :

'Go and look her up. Take it from me— if there is anyone in the world she now waits for, it's you. Hurry, hurry, before it's too late!'

The way he said those last words, I was shaken to the core.

I was a prisoner of the values I had inherited, and I'd not yet been fully released. There were still one or two doors that remained closed. A couple of shafts of light had made their way into my dark cell, but they weren't enough to light up the thick darkness of the cell. Chhote Chacha had, however, forced me to think and to break out of my cell. I had to go to Rohtak.

I ran into Raja Babu, my brother-in-law, right outside the house. I had a feeling that he wasn't pleased to see me. We were relatives, to be sure, but the relationship made for no attachment. He must have felt cornered. What he should have said at first sight he said after a studied delay :

'Welcome, Jijaji!'

His father was resting in bed. When he was informed of my arrival he groaned and creaked to a sitting position. By then I was in the room. It was filled with an all-pervasive smell— the kind of smell that issues from the skin of a child suffering from a relapsed typhus fever. He sat in semi-darkness with his glasses off, his big round eyes fixed at me. I touched his feet. He immediately fired off :

'So you show up *now*, dear son-in-law?'

I didn't quite understand, but kept quiet. He went on without stopping.

'You did something to her. . . you must have. She took to bed the day she came back. What was it? One telegram after another, but no response! You poisoned her! You poisoned my daughter. You took everything she had and you poisoned her!'

He seemed to be wailing. I didn't quite grasp what he was saying. I mustered courage and asked :

'What happened to her? She started a coughing fit the same day. We wanted to send for the doctor but she refused. When Raja Babu came and got to know that she had a coughing fit, he couldn't wait. He wanted to bring her back immediately,'

'Yes, yes, blame it all on him. Cast all your guilt on him.'

I cut him short. 'Where is Rupa?' I snapped.

The two of them looked at each other. Then the father pointed

upward and said in a weepy voice : 'Up there!' His finger stood erect as if holding the Sudarshan Chakra.

I became almost unconscious with shock. I couldn't figure out what I should do. To try and prepare a mental picture of whatever had happened and let it determine my words and deeds seemed impossible. I stood holding the chair for some time, then sat down in it. His words 'Up.. . up. . . up. . . there!' rose and fell, rose and fell, in a periodic rhythm in my ears. I felt totally alone. I never have had any relationship with Rupa which could be called a husband-wife relationship, except that we had made the mandatory seven rounds of the ritual fire at the wedding ceremony. The first night, she sat like a bundle, convulsed with cough. The cough lasted the whole night. Her suffering wasn't quite clear to me then; it is much clearer now. The pangs of an unfulfilled marriage must have lacerated her soul : she was a bride who couldn't become a wife. I recalled that as soon as I had tried to touch her, from behind the veil that completely hid her face, she cut me short with 'Don't touch me. . . I. . . I. . .!' and she had broken into sobs while her coughing fit reached a crescendo. I had then wondered : Why did she stop me? I had later discovered that my doubts were unfounded and the real reasons were different. When the coughing got worse and I wanted to rub her back, she stopped me again. There was nothing I could do except to watch her agony helplessly. Craving to be free of the suffering of a helpless spectator, I came out of the room. There was nothing else I could have done. This was my first encounter with a woman in the role of my wife. When I came out, I felt something had drained out from me like water from a Vasudev bowl at the touch of Krishna's feet. If I had committed a crime, it was to marry her. My punishment : Be a widower! The emptiness of a widower's life is worse than that of a store suddenly emptied of its priceless treasure, especially if it comes about in this way. . .!

I remember having asked myself then : is the fate of a widower indeed so tragic? I wonder why I asked myself that question : maybe because I had never become a husband, nor she a wife. Then I thought of my grand-aunt— what had made her a widow? She

never knew what a husband was, nor had she ever seen one. When she was declared a widow, she probably didn't know what being a widow meant. I at least knew. To be subjected to a misfortune without your knowing it, and to be made aware of it subsequently may well be an absurdity so painful that there is nothing that can persuade you to compromise with it. Did the performance of a mere ritual become so potent a curse that she died a wife whose 'husband' was living, while I lived a husband whose 'wife' was dead?

I lost control of myself. 'When did Rupa die?' I shouted.

Myths sometimes come alive for you, if you happen to be caught in the grip of analogous situations. The myth of Sati came alive for me now. I felt I was Sati's husband and I must destroy the life-yagna of my father-in-law; I must supplant the heads of those attending the yagna with the heads of goats and pigs. But was I Rudra? Here was Vakil Sahib shouting louder than me—perhaps he alone could shout louder than me, I felt :

'She didn't die : she was killed!'

I raised my pitch even higher :

'Stop this nonsense. Tell me how and when she died.'

He had perhaps never expected me to shout. He was intimidated, but now resorted to pettifoggery.

'How's that your concern now? She died with your name on her lips. We sent you two telegrams.'

'Stop lying! Enough's enough.'

I was accompanied by Dīwānjī. He was a man of a serious disposition. So far he had been standing quietly to one side. Now he came forward and offered in a conciliatory tone :

'Samdhī Sahib, you are my master as much as Bhaskar Babu is. Do you seriously believe that we received telegrams of bahu's illness and refused to move? The place is just about a stone's throw; even if we walked, we'd be here in a few hours. No, this was not right of you. . . you let the bahu die without so much as a touch of her husband. There'll be no salvation for her soul : it'll wander from place to place looking for her husband. . .'

Dīwānī was carried away. Raja Babu was very uncomfortable;

so, it now seemed, was Vakil Sahib.

Dīwānjī continues : 'Her last rites should've been performed by her people— and her people were there, not here. Give us some of her things— we must at least have some symbolic last rites there.'

'No, no, what's the difference? People there, people here— they're all the same. . .' Vakil Sahib rapid-fired.

A bird flying merrily in the sky— singing. Suddenly it's hit. A wing falls off. The bird goes into a tailspin and falls to the ground. Limping, one wing outspread, it is looking for the lost wing.

That was how I felt.

Dīwānjī insisted : 'Give us a few of her clothes, if you won't give us anything else. We can at least have a *mukti-yagna* performed and have the *pātak* removed. We're losing merit without knowing it. Worship of the gods is prohibited during *pātak*, but we have been worshipping them everyday.

'What did you give her that you dare to ask for her things now? Except poison? You have nothing to do with my daughter.'

I was getting more hopeless every moment. Dīwānjī put a supporting arm around me, and we came out. 'Let's go,' he said. 'Their motives are suspect. Let bygones be bygones— we must act with fortitude. Bahūrānī had to go; and she's gone. Destiny wished it that way.'

We walked to the railway station. Stations like this one were mostly deserted. A train halted there once in a way, if at all. The image of Rupa's lean frame convulsed by cough, her neck and hands rocked with spasms, her agonizing struggle to suppress the raging cough— all flashed before my eyes. Time and again, a wave of anger rose from within me. I wanted to go charging like a rogue elephant, and throw myself at the walls of that house, and send it crashing to the ground. But I was also aware that I was no rogue elephant. Then I thought of the stories about snakes. You kill the male and the female travels over seven continents to avenge herself. Does the male do the same for the female? Or does it slink into some gutter like an impotent coward? These and other questions smoked inside me like dung-cakes under hot cinders. You press

more cinders at one point, and the questions burst out smoking at another point; you bottle them up there and they burst a hole elsewhere. . . and so on it goes.

There was still some time left for the train to arrive. Hindus were not supposed to eat on the train— it went against their religion. There were some who did eat : they were considered *mlecchas.* Even water was not permitted. There were two kinds of water available at the stations— Hindu water and Muslim water. Hindus avoided even Hindu water. After all, there were Hindus and Hindus! There was no knowing which Hindu might have touched it and when. You may need lemon to separate milk, but water was enough to separate the Hindus then.

We were hungry. And thirsty too. At my wife's parents,' we weren't offered even water; to expect a meal was unthinkable. With parched throats and dry mouths, we sat on a bench in a shady corner. I was so bewildered and confused I didn't know what thoughts to think and what thoughts to reject. Dīwānjī applied the balm of his soothing talk at regular intervals, but his words were like water off duck's back : nothing made an impression. Except the image of Rupa. The image that I had seen that night. Sometimes a word would find a gap in the seige and find entry into my mind, but the effect would be like that of a stringed instrument when a stray finger breaks the silence by plucking a single string in it.

Suddenly, Dīwānjī sprang up. I looked about and saw Raja Babu accompanied by a lady standing beside us. The lady suddenly stooped low and grabbed my feet. Flustered, I withdrew instinctively.

'My mother,' said Raja Babu.

I felt my gorge rise.

'Why has she come here? What's the matter? There's nothing between us now.'

'Please don't bring such words to your lips. We have lost our daughter, but we aren't going to lose you. Her death had deranged her father. Don't push us further into hell. . .'

'There was drama enough at your house,' I said. 'Must you stage more here?'

Dīwānjī was busy trying to think of a way out of this one. Men in those days were completely flummoxed if confronted by women. It was like trumping an ace. He removed his cap and wiped the sweat on his bald pate with his palm. Then he said to Raja Babu.

'Please take bahuji home. There was no call for her to come here. And tell here we'll do the last rites as well as we can arrange under the circumstances— not for you, of course, but for our own sake.'

He continued in a suppressed tone :

'Bahuji was mother to *bahūrānī;* at least she could've sent word to us. Son-in-law or son— what's the difference? We didn't even get to know what overtook her. Why this sudden death? Had Bade Rai known, Dashrath-like that he is, he'd even be prepared to send her to England for treatment. You can't imagine how fond the Rais were of the bahu. It had been ages since a bahu had entered the haveli portals.'

Dīwānjī's words were enough to bring tears to my eyes. I wept.

'Don't cry, son! It was our fault. Rupa had TB. We all hoped she'd recover after marriage. She didn't wish to marry. She never let anyone touch her. Only if her father had listened to her, she might've lived a little longer. Even in her last breath, she had nothing but praise for you and for everyone else at home there. He wanted to come near me, she said, he wanted to touch me, he loved me so much, but I stopped him. Please send for him. I want to touch his feet, she said. But I was helpless. I was a slave. . . like her.'

Vishvanath, my brother-in-law, stood like one guilty, and never raised his head once. His mother said : 'Please come back home with us once. You must perform the last rites— so her soul can rest in peace.'

Dīwānjī knew my feelings. 'Look, bahuji,' he said, 'She was not only our daughter but the Lakshmi of our house. When we are home we'll do the rites. But it's not possible to go back with you. After the treatment Vakil Sahib meted out to us, there's nothing we can go back to. You knew your daughter was dying, but what

about us? We were taking back a young couple— like Ram and Sita— a couple we thought will live for ever and ever, but what happened? Our Lakshmi stepped into the house and died. The house whose doors had barely opened closed again forever.' He paused a little, then resumed : 'We'd only hoped that you'd give us something of hers, a dress or something, and we'd be able to use it to do the rites, but Vakil Sahib denied us even that! We'd sent her here loaded with gifts. . .'

'I'll have the things sent if possible, after talking to father,' said Raja Babu.

I finally broke my silence.

'Shut up,' I said. 'Couldn't you have told us about her illness when you came to take her back? Wouldn't we've arranged her to be treated then? Go back home and take Mataji with you. Forget about us.'

I saw her mother walk away. How did she manage to walk, I wondered.

When Bade Rai heard the news, he was paralysed with shock. 'Oh, God!' he mumbled to himself, 'What curse sits on this house? Will this house never see life again? What sins have we committed?'

It was as if the sinking lights of the haveli had finally gone out. Everyone was drowned in an unfathomable darkness with little hope of the lights returning again. The servants tiptoed over the place, as if the dead body lay in the house itself, awaiting cremation, and a canyon of silence had grown around it. The slightest sound seemed to add to its plunging depths. Rahmatullah was the first one to make it every morning. Huddled in a corner of the groundsheets spread on the floor, he shed silent tears. People came and went the whole day. Only once in all these days did he open his shop, and that was the time when a shroud had to be got ready to wrap Rupa's figure made in dough. He insisted that only he would stitch the shroud since it was he who had decorated the palanquin on which Rupa had entered the haveli. It had astonished everyone. Everyone remembered that he had indeed stitched, and his wife embroidered, the curtains on Rupa's palanquin.

In the evening the horses trooped in for their feed, on tiptoes, it seemed. They stood in a row, their heads bowed. The fodder-bags were mounted. As they munched the fodder, their heads bobbed up and down, and up and down went the fodder-bags. Their eyes, flickering sideways atop the edges of the bags, seemed to be attempting an appraisal of the situation. Bade Rai was frozen to the core, and sat like a block of ice. Chhote Rai was watching and supervising in hushed silence. I was performing the rites. For whom— I sometimes wondered. For one who I'd never seen, and never touched! Rani and Arun, who had been thrilled with the idea of a new bhabhi, were now at a loose end, their thrill and excitement sunk and stilled like an empty vessel that had been thrown aside after it had boiled over and spilled its contents.

Every afternoon, Chachi had to receive the mourners. Women came in groups and wailed. Then they argued. Barely married and already dead? How did she die? What happened to her? Chachi didn't know what to say. If you suspected anything, why did you have to go in for that girl? A son of the Rais' had all the choice in the world. They say there was a fat dowry. Chachi's lips were sealed. All she would say was 'It was God's will. We all have to bow before His will.' The women would agree and would resume their interrogation and argumentation : Maybe there's a secret. . . Is it possible that. . . It could be that. . . Chachi knew what they were hinting at, but tried to dismiss it by saying : 'The only secret was the time. When the time came, Death took her away. That was her fated stay with us. What else is there to say?'

Majhhali Chachi and Chacha visited us only twice. They came and sat like visitors and left. Bade Rai sat like a statue in an art display. A nod to a greeting, folded hands when the guests left. The ever-widening circle of people's chatter came, touched him and disintegrated. The only sentence that ever escaped him was 'It's a punishment— for the sins I've committed.'

Whenever Arun found Rani by herself, he got on her nerves. He would ask : 'Is bhabhi dead?'

'No, not dead. Angry with us,' Rani would say, to deflect his thoughts.

'Does one die if one's angry?'

'Yes,' she'd say, unthinkingly, to put him off the topic.

'But Majhhale Chacha is angry too!'

Rani was still young, and didn't know how to get out of that one. She kept getting caught in traps of her own making. She tried to unravel this one by saying :

'If Majhhale Chacha hears this, he'll be angry with you.'

'Then he'll surely be dead.'

Rani clapped a hand on his mouth and looked around. Somebody might have overheard him.

'Don't say such things about your own people; it's not right,' she said.

'But you yourself said about bhabhi that she was dead!'

Rani started crying. Arun tried to make up to her, but he couldn't find out where he'd gone wrong.

When the *terahvin* was over, Bade Rai one day said, apropos of nothing :

'Do you think the curse of Majhhali Bahu is on this house?'

Chhote Rai, to whom the question was addressed, retorted rather hotly :

'Why only Majhhali Bahu? It could be the curse of any woman of our family. What respect did they ever receive from us. . .?' He stopped, but it seemed as if he had a lot more to say.

Bade Rai looked away.

After all the rites were over, Bade Rai made a trip to Vakil Sahib's place. That was when people first found out that he had grey hair. He gave up using the dye after that event. Later we found out that— Vakil Sahib had been at home all along, but the son told Bade Rai that he wasn't. He himself received Bade Rai and sat with him. Like a man in penance, the house had a withered look. Raja Babu was silent. Vakil Sahib's wife sent some refreshments which Bade Rai refused with folded hands. He had taken with him all the dowry given to Rupa by her parents.

This had surely touched a cord in the heart of Vakil Sahib's

wife. She came and stood behind the door and said :

'I seek your forgiveness. . . you are truly a noble man. She was our daughter, but you placed her higher than your own.' She stopped, then added : 'There're gifts which you'd given to Rupa. . only Vakil Sahib knows about them. . .

'You misunderstand me. I came to return, not to collect. We couldn't keep her, why should we want to keep her things? She left you as a daughter, she came back as a daughter. We can't plead guilty even to having seen her. All this was your daughter's property, so it is yours now.' He paused.

'Tell Vakil Sahib when he comes back,' he resumed a little later, 'that, for us, a relationship, once established, is sacred. It's like a Hindu marriage : nothing can break it. Let him honour it, if he can. He has been unfair not to us alone, but to his own daughter. We seek no redress, but will his daughter forgive him?'

Bade Rai got up. As he did so, the platter with the refreshments was knocked to the ground, and the eatables ran on the floor. The platter rang aloud and went on ringing for a while. Stunned by the clangour, the house seemed to suck in its breath and stand still for a moment.

Bade Rai bent down, picked up the platter and put it back on the table.

The whole house was riding a rickety boat. Repeatedly on the point of overturning, it tossed, turned, and then steadied itself. we often couldn't help the feeling that we might be better off if it did overturn, but, however rickety and ramshackle, a boat was a boat and would take its own time to sink. We had collected all kinds of baggage aboard, some of it our own which we had collected for no rhyme or reason. The political conditions were changing day by day. Politics has so much weight that the balance always tilts to its side, even as the other side begins to lose weight till it weighs no more then zero. Our politics was a partisan politics of a handful of people. The politics that was now developing was a much bigger affair encompassing the people of the entire country. We, and others like us, still believed in the power of the ruling authority, or the

government. Politics were dictated by the government, and the government was with us. That was what we believed, but sometimes little doubts raised their heads. The certainty was lost and we were thrown into confusion. Was it possible that the groundswell of this changing politics would one day engulf the government? But when we looked to history and found that all the engulfing and swamping in the past had been done by the governments and to the governments, we felt greatly reassured, and found our faith restabilising itself.

Chhote Rai pored over newspapers for hours. This country, he would sometimes say, is like a horse pinioned with the ropes of the foreigners, but let them not mistake it for Safed whom they could shoot down with bullets. I'm not free either, he would go on to say, but my chains are of a different sort. They are the chains of attachment to my family. Are they really chains, I wonder! The real chains are the ones that bind our mother, this country of ours. The day we can break these chains, we'll be free. The chains we've embraced will, however, still be there. That day I must ask myself 'Why?' Why did I let it happen, knowing full well what was happening? Why did I behave like a dictator with myself? Yes, a dictator. Not only countries, but individuals too have dictators. I suppressed my own revolt like a dictator, no less. You catch a mote in your eye and you can't open the eye till the mote is there. The mote has total control of your eye and keeps it shut. We're like a mote in the country's eye. We're like the shavings and the dust that fly from the grinding lathes of dictatorships and feudal overlordships.

Chhote Rai was like an animal left to graze with one of its legs tied to a stake with a long rope. It could graze as it chose, but could not break free. He had tried to break free once, and had given a hefty pull at the rope, but then had given up and indeed had secured the leg himself. Now he called it Destiny.

One day Chhote Rai called me over and said :

'Bhaskar, I know I'm an uncle and not a father to you. My claims on you are those of an uncle, and an uncle's claims on his nephew derive from that of the father. If he so wishes, the father

can withdraw the rights from the uncle. Majhhale Rai has no claims on you now, and you have none on him. Partly he lost these claims himself, and partly they were taken away from him. I only want to give you a warning : Decide your future now. You have a large Hetdon to run.' As he said these words, his eyes were focused at a long distance. 'It is of course possible that you may never be called upon to do so. The country may be free before then. People will tell you to give up the fiefdom, and retain only what you need. Nobody will understand if you tell them that, as it is, the fiefdom is not big enough to make the ends meet. They'll be starving people— the people whom you need to tell this. They won't understand. Everything depends on this, you see, on whether one understands or one doesn't. But you have to take over the responsibility of this household. Arun is still too young. We don't know how soon that day might be here. Get a wife. We two brothers are childless anyway— let at least one of the branches flower. One day, the two of you may well have to look after us childless ones too!'

Chhote Rai's voice seemed to be coming to me travelling over a long distance. He sat right before me, but it seemed to me he was somewhere else, very far away, very far inside, and that was where the voice arose from. It happens all the time. Sometimes a man is speaking, but inwardly, very inwardly, and we can hear nothing. Sometimes he is all outside, and cannot make anything of what is going on inside. Here he was inside, but audible outside. I said to him : 'Why do you speak that way? God willing. . .

He laughed. He had caught my meaning. 'I'm not a child any more,' he said, 'It's not that we didn't have children. We did, but in the end it was as good as not having any. Your Chachi couldn't nurse the first one. The child put his lips to her breasts and sucked blood. They all said he was a demonic spirit: I was furious. A baby, a demon! Then we hired a wet nurse. Her milk didn't agree with the baby, and he died at two months. The people then said the nurse was an ogress. I begged to differ. A wet nurse is a surrogate mother, I said. But no one listened to me. Your Chachi cried herself crazy. She punished herself for being her child's murderess. I tried

to make her see sense : Can one who gives birth ever be a murderess, I asked her. Somehow or the other, we managed to bring her round. I thought if she could give birth again, it'd help her to put the past behind her. She gave birth to a daughter. A goat was procured for her. Your Chachi refused to nurse her. Her breasts were overflowing with milk; she cried and cried but she refused to nurse. This is Pūtnā's milk, she said. The baby was always hungry and one day she also left us. That was when we decided enough was enough. No more chasing children. The whole world was our child and we were its children. Of course, they all say this, but very few actually practise it. Even now, we can think of only a few as our own children— you, Rani, Arun. . .! I don't wish you the same fate— to preach one thing and practise another— for that is a hiatus that hurts.'

'But.

'What you want to say is correct. The stamp of the widower across your forehead is an unsolicited gift thrust on you, but in no way can you be held responsible for it.'

I felt then that Chhote Rai was a person apart. The soundest of them all. He had alienated himself from his tragedy, and was now using it as a warning signal to others.

Around this time one day, a close friend of Bade Rai called on him. His arrival without notice always portended some explosive development. He was Bade Rai's senior in age. After the usual preliminaries, he asked Bade Rai :

'Have you the heard the latest, Bade Rai?'

'No, what's it?'

'Your childless brother Krishna Rai is childless no more.'

Bade Rai laughed and said : 'My dear Rameshwar, I am aware you use dramatic announcements routinely like digestive pills, but why make my brother childless? Neither of my brothers is childless.'

'That shows how noble and self-deluded you are. But the fact is Krishna Rai has adopted an orphan. Treat it how you will : as a dramatization, or a fact.'

A dark shadow fell across Bade Rai's face. 'Krishna has adopted an orphan!' he repeated. 'You aren't sick or something?'

'Let's worry about your health first. They found an abandoned child behind the hospital yesterday. Probably the result of some misadventure. Someone took him to the Kotwali, and the Collector today gave him to Krishna Rai for adoption. A contract has been signed that they would bring him up, and if at any time they want to give him up he'd be entitled to such and such a share of their property. A detailed statement of the property is attached. The Collector congratulated Krishna Rai on this noble deed, and said he had set up a unique example of service to humanity.'

Bade Rai was dumb. Rameshwar Babu was laughing and carrying on with his commentary :

'It's true that Gandhiji too doesn't respect caste and race, bu' even he never adopted an abandoned child, except that chamār boy. . . I hear he died. On this issue, however, he and the British Government are one. And now the Rais have joined them. There is no escaping now that Krishna Rai has an heir.'

Chhote Rai, who had been keeping quiet, now joined in :

'Rameshwar Babu,' he said, 'he has adopted a child, not brought home a mistress. Every child is entitled to love and care, and it's everyone's duty to give him that love and care. If one discriminates between children, that's a flaw in the eye of the beholder, not in the child.'

That ruffled Rameshwar Babu a bit. 'No, no,' he said. 'Of course there's nothing wrong in it. Why don't you get one too?' There was poison in the eyes.

Bade Rai intervened. 'Watch your tongue, Rameshwar Babu. It's slipping.'

The poison was now transferred to the tongue. Disguising it with laughter, Rameshwar Babu said :

'What did I say that was wrong? Tell me. All I said was : May your brother's tribe increase! Get him a child anyway you can : beg, borrow, steal, but let him be a father. Avoid the hassle of producing one yourself. Only a matter of time really. You may start getting ready-to-use kids off the shelf very soon.'

Chhote Rai was deeply wounded, but didn't lose patience. He said :

'You're right. I should've done the same, but I have neither Majhhale Bhaiya's courage, nor his large heart. I think a lot, but am unable to make any moves. Majhhale Bhaiya may think, or he may not, I don't know, but he's sure able to make his moves. I have no regrets, however. I've cast my fate with Bade Bhaiya; Majhhale Bhaiya still keeps his with himself. That of course makes him a bit independent. But, as for me, my kids are right here.' He breathed a long sigh over the last sentence. Then, without waiting for a response, he got up and left. Bade Rai saw him go, but said nothing. Later, he told Rameshwar Babu : 'It wasn't right. You shouldn't have said that.'

'Look, Hari Rai, I belong to the old school. If he is a man of new ideas, let him drown himself in them. For all I care, but let him not throw them at me. For me, my own darkness, if that's what it is, is the light I cherish. Krishna Rai may be your brother, but does that mean that he can do what he pleases and we keep our eyes and mouths shut? Does that mean that the spotless name of the house of Rais will now be dragged into mud by a child born in sin, and we'll watch in silence? All right, all right, if that's the way you want it.'

'Let's wait till we find out all the facts.'

'What facts do you want to find out? On the Collector's request I have signed the contract as a witness.'

Bade Rai fell silent. It was time to light up the evening lamps.

The events of that day kept troubling Chhote Rai for many days. He never told Chachi everything, only that Majhhale Rai had adopted an orphan. She only said : 'I wish he had done it while Majhhali Jithānī was still alive. It would have spared her the sin of. . .' She let out a sigh and continued : 'It's unbearable. . . This life without a child.'

Chhote Rai looked at her and turned his face away. 'You're right,' he said. 'Majhhale Bhaiya did the right thing. They get a child, and an orphan gets a home. I hear the Collector was all praise...

He's a Christian after all. He sees the orphans, and he thinks of the Christ.'

'And look at our fate! We were blessed, and we strived to keep our blessings, and the hand of blessing was taken away. One doesn't grieve for what one never had, but to have and then to lose it leaves a wound that never heals. It hurts to remember, and it hurts to forget. Do go and pay him a visit some day. Take a gift with you. A new bud has blossomed on a branch of your tree— do not take it otherwise.'

Chhote Rai reflected on this. Then said : 'Bade Bhaiya may not like it. He's very hurt. The way Rameshwar babu put things didn't help much either. And the question of family honour. Both are tearing Bade Rai apart. I can't understand why Majhhale Bhaiya can't get along with Bade Bhaiya. Bade Bhaiya is always suffering on his account. And to think that he has always cared more for him! If I care more for Bade Bhaiya, that's probably because I have always craved his recognition.' Chhote Rai thought a little, then continued : 'I wonder why Majhhale Bhaiya rebels against Bade Bhaiya. For whom? It can only be for himself. But a rebellion for yourself is nothing but selfishness. The test of a rebellion is Yoga— its capacity to unite : how many people can it bring together? Gandhi is a rebel— and he is a yogi. A rebellion centred on oneself is no rebellion— it's better to be tethered to a stake.'

Suddenly Chhote Rai thought of what Rameshwar Babu had said. He said to Chachi :

'Rameshwar Bhai can be ridiculous at times. Was saying the other day : Maybe one day all babies will come made to order : conceived in one place, nursed in another, brought up. . .'

Chachi smiled. 'Was it intended for us?' she asked after a little thought.

'No, no. . . Why should it be intended for us? He said it in passing. You know he is one of those who shoot from the lips.'

'And that's how people rub salt into your wounds. They need do no more to hurt you.'

'Come on, let's forget it. Tell me one thing : Do you have the courage?'

'Courage? To do what?'

'You always say Arun is our son. . .'

'Are you going to abandon him?'

'No, but I do sometimes ask myself : Why is adoption necessary? Is it so important to have a child that without him our whole existence, this true and real existence, becomes meaningless? After all we must live our life, and the children must live theirs. And we must live our life so that it's a whole life. There's no point in living a thwarted, half-hearted life. Majhhale Rai has attempted precisely this. He has tried to make his life whole, self-sufficient, and complete. You go on collecting extra baggage in life and where does it lead you? We should indeed be happy that we have greater freedom than most in many things.'

'I don't know about freedom. . . I have heard of people trying to free their country of foreign rule, but this is the first time I'm hearing about people trying to free themselves of their children. Children may well tie you down, but the happiness they give is infinitely greater in comparison.'

Chhoti Chachi was hurt. Her eyes overflowing, she looked away. The world around her was tremulous with her tears.

Though a widower in the marriage market, I was still a good catch for prospecting alliance-seekers. Heir to a small estate, young, rich! Offers were pouring in. The choice of the boy, or the girl mattered little then; not that it matters very much more now, though I'm talking of a time nearly seventy years gone. Bade Rai directed the alliance-seekers to Chhote Rai. This created endless anxiety for Chhote Rai. He could never decide how to decide. He couldn't be as confident or independent as a father. Whether he said 'Yes' or 'No', he would always feel he was stepping on someone else's rights. Everyone must take his own decisions, he said. You shirk your responsibility by not doing so. And by thrusting that responsibility on someone else you do not honour him; you put him in a moral fix.'

Then one day he called me and said :

'Look, Bhaskar, I'm not a practical man. I'm always lost in

pointless debates with myself. I feel I never learnt to take the responsibility for others' joys and sorrows. Everyone must take this responsibility himself— that's what I've believed. It's true that one can universalize one's sorrow and get a better perspective on it only by including the others' sorrow in one's own. The same goes for joy. The truly great joy is one that brings joy to the greatest number. But people think I'm talking in the air. Your marriage relates only to you, and to the person you're getting married to; it relates to your happiness and her happiness. There's no place for a third person in a marriage. Yet, it's strange that we hardly ever consult these two persons. All the decisions are taken by others. Bade Bhaiya wishes to give me the privilege of taking the final decision in this matter, and I, on the other hand, feel I'm usurping your rights.'

I couldn't follow then what Chhote Rai was saying, so I held my peace. He had still not finished : 'I have half a mind to direct to you the people who come to me, but I don't think I can do it. I do however wish that when I have one of these people calling on me, you'd come and sit by my side, listen to what they say and give me the benefit of your opinion.'

For me, that was an unheard-of situation.

But that was what Chhote Rai did. Whenever he had an alliance-seeking visitor, he called me and asked me for my views on the prospective bride and her family. He would tell me : 'Look, if I weren't representing Bade Bhaiya and were to be on my own, I'd say : 'Let the boy and the girl meet and decide for themselves.' Majhhale Rai didn't depend on anyone for his second marriage, did he? He certainly is more progressive than us.' Later, he said: 'We've never given women the right to choose. The women themselves probably do not realize that they have this right. Majhhali Bhabhi had to lay down her life because of this. I have the greatest respect for her. No matter what people say about her, she gave a fitting reply to Bade Rai's calumny. If she'd died without giving the reply, she'd not have had the same place in my eyes. It becomes necessary sometimes for an innocent person to commit

a crime so that the true criminal can be exposed.'

Whenever this topic came up in discussion, Chhote Rai was carried away. The fate of Majhhali Bhabhi had left a deep scar on his soul. He thought she had been convicted and hanged to cover up for the crimes of another. He did not absolve himself or Bade Rai of complicity in the case. Sometimes he would put a direct question to me :

'Why do you want to marry?'

I had no reply to this question. In fact, it was considered utter shamelessness even to entertain this question. So I kept quiet. He would go on :

'Don't blush. Ponder the question. Ponder it deeply. Our religion says we must procreate so that we can repay the debt we owe our forefathers; and we can repay it only by producing a son. But that repayment is possible even without procreation. The Mahābhārata gives us an example. Literature only reflects reality, however much we might dismiss it as all imagination. You might say that was adultery, but don't we have adultery now? Why raise such a fuss over a small matter? What Majhhali Bhabhi did was no different. Marriage has meaning only if two persons who crave security and understanding, and who are desirous of equal partnership in the pleasures incident on the body, come together in union. The two go together : pleasures of companionship and marriage. I think our marriage is an example. If you can think along these lines, marriage will have some meaning for you. If not, well, the world goes on. . .

To me all this talk seemed so much hot air. I was of the view that Chhote Rai taxed his mind too much and his tongue even more. Did the things he said make any sense? Probably, I thought, he was ahead of the times. In those days, when women were, well, women, to expend so much thought on them seemed definitely odd. Now things are different. It is now fashionable to think such thoughts about women. In those days, limits were set even to what you could think.

One day, Chhote Rai directed a visitor to me. I was out in the

zamindari. The visitor belonged to Punjab and was an employee in the District Courts. I don't remember exactly what he did, but probable he was a *peshkār* to the judge, or, perhaps, in charge of the file room. For a man of such a lowly status to think of seeking an alliance with a family like ours must have taken a lot of guts. It did shake me up a little. Then I remembered that I was a widower. Secondhand good. And also that he had used one of our closest relatives as the go-between. His uncle had been one of the old glories of Punjab. He was to tell me about him at great length.

When he reached the camp, I had just completed my breakfast and was about to set out on horseback on my rounds. The job of collecting revenue was a tough one. The tenants were poor. Everyone claimed a share of their crops— from the zamindar to the village chowkidār. Making the ends meet was a never-ending struggle. They borrowed money, paid interest on it and also accepted physical punishment. When the zamindari was abolished, and we fell on days not very different from the ones the tenants lived, a little appreciation of their fate began to make itself felt to us. If only the zamindars did not always think of getting money, more money and still more money, maybe they would have had an appreciation of the conditions in which others lived, but the biggest handicap the feudal set-up had always suffered from was a total incapacity to see beyond its immediate interests. For them, the boundaries of the world began and ended within these interests. I may mention that this is not a conclusion drawn from my own thinking; it is actually what my son Raghubar says. Don't get startled and say : 'A son? Already? But you aren't married yet.' I am telling you my story at the age of eighty-four. I have two sons and a daughter now. In fact, I had several more. I get all confused when I think of all these things. Past events get connected in my mind with present contexts, present events with past contexts. When I now think of the past, I begin to realize that we had mistaken a pond for an ocean spreading out to infinity on three sides. The bird looks at the seed of grain and picks it up and flies away. Perhaps the seed of grain is the whole sky for her. But enough about this confusion. Let me come back to what I was telling you about. The

visitor said to me : 'Your uncle, Raghav Rai Sahib, has directed me to you. I am from Punjab.'

People then didn't name their city; they simply named the province from which they came. If it was Punjab, then every place in it was Punjab. We knew Punjab for its buffaloes.

'Wonderful buffaloes you have in Punjab!' I found myself saying.

He was an elderly gentleman. My statement first took him by surprise, but then his face broke into a smile. I sensed that I had said something wrong, though it had come naturally at the time.

'I haven't come to see you about buffaloes,' he said. 'I've come about my daughter's marriage.'

I didn't know how to counter the wry humour. Dressed in breeches, I must already have looked like a polished frame of wood. His comment made me more wooden. By then Bhikhu came to my rescue. He had brought the visitor on his tonga. He broke the ice between us.

'Chhote Rai has sent sahib to you,' he said.

'Yes, sahib has told me.'

'My name is B.Sahai,' he said. I had by now gathered my wits. I sent for some chairs. There were only two or three in the camp. We had to make do with cots mostly. He took a chair. I sent word to the cook that a guest had arrived from town, and Bhikhu sāīs too, and that meals must be got ready for both. Then I offered him sugarcane juice. They were making *gur*. There was *sonth* (dry ginger) and dry fruit in the *gur*. But he refused breakfast, and kept talking about his daughter.

'I know that the Rai family is nobility, and it's nothing short of reaching for the moon for me to talk of marrying my daughter into the family. But my daughter Kala is a girl without compare. She has studied a lot. Though she went up only to the eighth standard, she has studied with a private teacher. She taught her English poetry, Shakespeare's plays, songs, and now Kala has also learnt cycling and horse-riding.

I perked up and took a look at myself. He hadn't yet finished:

'If you so wished, she could help you in running the zamindari; but no matter if you don't. I am aware that they don't approve of women going out to work. Punjab is different in this respect : no difference between a son and a daughter.' He laughed.

'She's not very fair,' he continued, 'but of course not as dark as me. Her mother was very fair, though. So is her brother.' His gaze was fixed at me as he said these words. I squirmed. He laughed again. 'She has a wheatish complexion actually. I've brought her up with great care. I always had the idea that one day she'll add to the lustre of an illustrious family. Her brother, Padam, is studying law. Her grandfather, Rai Bahadur Banshidhar, was a lawyer too. One of the glories of the old Punjab. Padam is going to try and become a Munsif (magistrate). I have married a second time too. The first one survived only for a few years. She had no kids. She also loves these kids.'

I jumped. 'What?' I spluttered.

He laughed. 'Pay no attention. That was just by the way. They say mothers who die craving for children keep haunting about the place till children are born. It's quite possible, isn't it, that your first wife too. . .'

'Let's keep her out of it. . .' I cut him short.

He clammed up. He had Kala's photo with him. That was not yet a practice in U. P. I hesitated, but he was holding the photo under my nose. I stole a glance. Finding it difficult to resist the temptation of a good look, I forced myself to look away. Photos in those days were an ugly sight, compared, of course, to the excellent photography of our times. You would see a high, carved, wood, flower-vase stand supporting Girl, one in number, instead of a flower-vase. A royal drape covered the background. All girls, photographed for the purpose of marriage, were photographed exactly in the same style. One look at the photograph, and you could tell that here is Virgin, out to vanquish Boy in the battlefield of Marriage. But he got flustered. I think he had concluded that I didn't like the photo.

'Didn't you like the photo? It happens. Sometimes the camera lets you down.' The image of an Afghan selling musk form door

to door flashed in my mind : 'Don't go by the looks, sir. It's the real stuff. Use it and see the results.'

'No, no. It's not that,' I said. 'Please take it to Chachaji or to Bade Rai. The choice is theirs. Everything depends on them.'

Mr. Sahai gave a smile.

It appeared that he was not quite used to *gur* and sugarcane juice. In the evening, his stomach gave way and he got the runs. The same evening Bhikhu hauled him back to town. Someone advised him to take *belpatra* with curds, which he did. He was feeling better when he left. Nevertheless, a bucketful of water was loaded along with his things : you never knew. Must have splashed all the way to town.

Eventually I did marry Kala, daughter of Mr. B. Sahai. Kala was quite unlike UP girls. Brides in UP wore a veil, actually a part of their sari pulled over the face. Kala felt very uncomfortable with one. She wanted both of us to eat from the same platter. Eat from the same platter! When you couldn't even sit on the same bed during daylight hours! She of course did sometimes, but it was mortification for me. Kala also didn't like the fact that I spent the whole day in the male quarters of the house and entered the *zenānā* only at night. She liked to read. In our house, the only reading material was the Rāmāyana. She wanted to go cycling and horse-riding. We had everything, horses and cycles included, but not for her.

Chhoti Chachi used all her persuasive powers with Kala : 'Look, bahu, you're the Lakshmi of the Rai family. You simply have to get used to the customs and manners of this house. The men of this house may, if they so choose, ignore these customs once in a while, but the daughters and the daughter-in-law, never! The responsibility for preserving the customs rests on their shoulders alone.'

Kala did learn one lesson : not to utter a single word even if a storm was brewing inside. She listened in silence. This forced silence gradually started breaking her up, but neither she nor anyone else noted it. Sometimes she shut herself up in her room and started

talking to herself :

'Yours is a fate worse than a bird's. It can fly or set itself down as and where it pleases. But you? You happen to be a woman. From the father's house to the husband's : from one cage to another. That cage was a bit bigger, but here! Here you must squeeze yourself.'

She had once visited Calcutta, where she saw some pet koels. Every morning, they awakened the house to sweet music. When she returned to Punjab, she too obtained a pet koel. When the winter came, she draped a cloth over the cage. Next morning, they found the koel dead by the water bowl.

She often told me this story. The koel was suffocated, she would say. 'Why do you keep telling me this story?' I once asked her.

She had a sense of humour too.

'I don't keep telling you,' she said. 'I keep showing you. But if the koel's fate causes you pain, let's change it to a mynah. Any cagable bird will do! You know how clever a black mynah is! It calls you by your name. And parrots the name of Ram. Of course, that doesn't open the cage for her!'

It troubled me to hear her talk like this. Sometimes I was annoyed with her. 'Why do you talk like a fool all the time?' I would tell her.

She was good at repartee. 'Tell me this,' she would retort. 'How does a girl who, in the eyes of her parents, outsmarted the smartest lot of them turn into the stupidest of the stupid in her husband's house?'

When such talk became unbearable to me I shouted at her. She didn't normally cry, except when things crossed the limits. But the way she cried, quietly and innocently, it troubled others more than it did her. She maintained the lines of her face, and never once did a shadow of hatred cross it. Only a look of helplessness and a few tears. That frightened me. She, however, had a confidant in Chachi. She went and told her everything.

Chhote Rai sometimes told Chachi : 'Have you ever tried to view Kala as a peer? Try it sometimes. It's against tradition, I know. . . to treat your juniors as your equals. Born first, first forever—

that's the principle. All human rights mortgaged with the first-born. We don't realize how fortunate one is to find a friend, one who can share your thoughts, and, standing beside you like an equal, can make your struggle of life easier.' Chachi was perhaps the one who understood Chhote Rai best, but even she sometimes felt she needed a commentary to help her understand his mantra-like pronouncements.

We had been blessed with a daughter. The whole house burst into an orgy of celebration. After Arun, this was the first child to be born in our family. Majhhale Rai stayed aloof. When the family priest went and told him the news, he kept mum. Chachi, of course, made a comment : 'God knows we rejoice to hear that Bade Rai's haveli has been blessed with a daughter, but when a son was added to our family, Bade Rai wasn't pleased in the least.' And she started a narrative of the events on the day the son was 'born' to her. 'As the father-figure of the family, he should've been happy in our happiness,' she continued, 'But was he? We rejoice at his happiness, and he goes into mourning at ours.'

Majhhale Rai judged that she was overstepping the limits, so promptly pulled her up 'Don't talk nonsense. She's our granddaughter too. We wish her well, and we wish our son well too! Both must live, grow and flourish.'

The priest was accompanied by Bhavani, who stood listening silently. He decided that he had heard nothing and told the priest too not to whisper a word about it to Bade Rai. There already existed a gulf; it would deepen into an abyss. When they returned, Bade Rai fixed them with a questioning look and demanded : 'What did Krishna say?' When Bhavani did not respond, Bade Rai returned to his papers. Chhote Rai, who was present, sized up the situation and did not speak. Later Bhavani told me everything, but I too kept it from Bade Rai. I knew that it would only drive the wedge deeper between their hearts if I told him.

The birth of a child had raised Kala's spirits. Chhoti Chachi was happy as if her own dream had come true. Rani, though grown up now, had a girl's instinctive fascination for babies, and, despite

the fact that two maids were constantly in attendance, refused to share the nursing duties with anyone else. Arun wouldn't leave the baby for a moment. Even Bade Rai, when he came for his morning meal, spent a couple of minutes with the baby and baby-talked to him. Kala naturally felt that she now enjoyed a privileged position in the family. Though I never let out a word about it, I was often reminded of Rupa. Had she had the good fortune of becoming a mother, how would she have felt? But, poor girl, she. . . Kala sometimes sang a song : jas ki tas dhar dīni chadariyā. . . (Lit.'I left the bedsheet untouched.' i.e. I left the world exactly as I found it . . . I never quite fully understood the meaning of those words, but on occasions such as these I couldn't help being reminded of them.

When Rupa's mother got to know of the birth of Kala's daughter, she sent the traditional five sets of baby wear and a pair of small gold bracelets for the child. It took us some time to decide how to react. We had to decide between two difficult choices : returning the gift would be considered inauspicious for the baby daughter; accepting it would be a repetition of the humiliation Vakil Sahib had heaped on us. The matter was finally resolved by Chhoti Chachi. Let's keep the handkerchief to ward off the inauspicious effects, but no gold, she said. Had Rupa been alive, everything they sent would have been a welcome gift– -but now it's Kala. Only Kala's parents have the privilege of sending *chhūchhak*.

We never heard from the Vakil Sahib's again. Nor did we ever try to find out. When Raja Babu died, Chhote Rai paid them a visit and joined the mourning. Tuberculosis was a dreaded disease in those days. Vakil Sahib went bankrupt trying to save him. He held Chhote Rai's hand and wept, begging forgiveness for all he had done. Rupa's mother said only one sentence : 'What we did to our daughter came back to extract its penalty. We paid it with our son. Now all we have is an empty home and an empty stomach!'

The conditions he had seen there kept troubling Chhote Rai for many, many days.

Kala had a cousin— Jagan. Not exactly a cousin but something of

the sort. Kala's mother's sister had died. Jagan was the son of her husband's second wife. Kala's *mausā*, the husband of her aunt, was very fond of Kala, so his second wife, Kala's new *mausī*, too was very well-disposed towards her. The *mausā* had been a Subedar (J.C.O) in the British army, and had travelled all over the world. Jagan was his son. A very sharp student. Since the mausā was not only rich but also very influential, he had managed to send his son to England for studies. In this venture, he had been helped by Annie Besant's Theosophical Society. When Jagan returned to India after completing his studies, he got a message from Gandhiji to come and see him. Jagan had been president of the Indian Students' Union at Oxford. This organization didn't support the British Government, but neither did it oppose it. Jagan was however believed to follow a militant line and had been known to speak out in support of the war of independence then raging in India. But the English neither tried to prevent his activities nor imposed exile on him.

When Jagan received Gandhiji's message, he went wild with joy. He was to find out later that Gandhi kept track of all Indian youth returning after education abroad. His network of public relations was so extensive that every young man received his message either while still in England, or on the ship back home. An invitation from Gandhi was a coveted honour, and very few students turned it down. There were of course a few among them who were anglicized beyond repair, but even they went and called on Gandhi. When they came out after meeting him, they were not beyond abusing him : 'Loinclothed fakir! Does he think we will join his *bhajanmandali* (group of devotional singers) in loincloths? What nonsense!' However, every Indian in England then, no matter how anglicized, dreamt of returning to India one day.

Then there were a few who tried to curry favour with the British by flaunting the invitations from Gandhi. They usually met their match in others who, though they themselves might not call on Gandhi, still gave a fitting reply to such vain talk : 'You think you can belittle Gandhi by these shenanigans of yours? If Gandhiji wears a loincloth, do you think it's because he can't afford clothes

like ours? If he doesn't wear them, it's because he's seen the reality behind these clothes. They create a wall between him and the common man which he wants broken. There are already walls enough of religion and colour and caste which separate people. We must break down any wall that can be broken. People who wear clothes like you and me are accessible only to people like you and me. It's difficult for you and me to step out of the boundaries of 'you' and 'me'. Our education had clearly fixed the hierarchy of superiority in our minds : 'Among animals— men; among men— us!' Gandhi has exploded this vanity of ours.'

When Jagan landed in India, Gandhi was in Champaran leading an agitation against indigo farming; Kripalani was with him too. It took Jagan several days to reach Champaran. There weren't enough trains; the ones that were, were very slow. Then he had to wait for two days to meet Gandhi. He also met Rajendra Babu. While waiting to meet Gandhi, he had been briefed about the struggle for freedom. He had also been given some literature to read. When finally he sat face to face with Gandhi, he got a feeling he was facing a large-sized child who couldn't stop laughing. An easy and all-inclusive laugh. His hair looked as if mice had been at work on his head, and this made Jagan laugh. The body seemed totally dehydrated.

Gandhi asked him in his broken Hindi :

'Living in England, did you read anything about India?'

Jagan missed the import of the question. He said :

'No. The papers there carry more about you than about their king and queen. You're a magical figure for them.'

He laughed again. The laugh touched Jagan's heart. He was captivated.

'Don't talk about me. I am nothing. Talk of the Indian people. They're the ones who matter. Do you know anything about them?'

Jagan was overwhelmed. He couldn't think of an answer. Gandhi laughed and said :

'You have studied in England. Now study the Indian people. That's the study you need to do now.'

Jagan nodded mechanically as if Gandhi had already entered

his soul and was controlling each of his movements. Gandhi continued :

'Look, my brother, I have earned a bad name as a home wrecker. If you wish to serve the country, you'll have to sacrifice your family. When we get our country back, we'll get our families back too.' He examined Jagan closely.

Every time Gandhi laughed, Jagan felt that one more of his own masks had been peeled off. He later also met Kasturba. Gandhiji introduced him : 'He has just returned from England after completing his studies.' Ba said something in Gujarati and laughed. Gandhi smiled and said to Ba : 'Speak so he too can follow you. A language is appropriate only when everyone can follow it.'

'I said : 'Do you know what his parents will call you? A thief." said Ba.

Gandhi laughed and said : 'Of course, I'm a thief. After all, I must see to my gain.'

Jagan gave up his British attire. Gandhi entrusted him with the work of education. Jagan and Kripalani became good friends; later they were together at Gujarat Vidyapeeth for some time. Earlier Jagan had spent some time at Ramjas college, teaching. Later he went over to teach at National College, Lahore, run by Lala Lajpat Rai. Sardar Bhagat Singh, Yashpal and Sukhdev were his contemporaries in the college. They started calling Jagan 'Acharya.' Jagan Acharya was very fond of Bhagat Singh. Often Bhagat Singh disappeared for days on end, and Jagan tried to make him see the error of his ways. But Bhagat Singh replied : 'Day and night have no meaning for me. I have only two aims now : freedom for the country and food for my people. You think you can find freedom by proceeding like archaeologists— scraping and brushing and wiping; we think the only way to achieve freedom is to cut open the body and extract it like an egg. The country must be returned to its people; wages must go to them who work. What do we have now? Our country mortgaged and our wages denied!'

'A storm is strong and powerful but sometimes it blows over barely touching the heights. If you want to conquer the heights, you must take the hard way and sweat your way up.'

'Where's the guarantee that you'll reach the top? And when?' And then he added : 'Even a thin blade of grass that you'd never expect to fly can take wings in a storm.'

Then there did come a storm. Lalaji (Lala Lajpat Rai) died a martyr in the agitation against the Simon Commission. Jagan returned to Gandhiji's ashram. Bhagat Singh vowed vengeance. By now, from a Mahātmā, Gandhi had become Bapu (Father). The Khadi movement had picked up speed. An ideological movement started by Tilak took a practical turn and Jagan was nominated to lead the movement.

Jagan had not seen Kala ever since he had joined the congress. Kala often mentioned him, which was sufficient to scare me. I was afraid of Bade Rai's reaction when he got to know about it. Jagan also tied his wedding knot without anyone getting wise about it. His wife, Bin Kanti, better known as Binati Bahen in later years, also jumped into the fray of the freedom movement. Kala was impatient to meet her. She had met her only once briefly at the railway station with Jagan Acharya. Since he was then perhaps trying to shake off the police, she had barely been introduced to her.

1942. Gandhi gave the slogan 'Do or Die!' On August 9, Gandhiji was arrested. In a few days, all the leaders of the first rank were in prison. The leadership of the movement now fell on Jagan Acharya, one of the leaders of the second rank. His orders were to lead the movement while staying underground. In those days, Jagan Acharya appeared at our haveli one day. I had earlier met him on my wedding day. But when he came that day, I was out in the zamindari. He knew only Kala and me by face. At the gate, he ran into Rahmatullah and inquired : 'Does Bhaskar Rai live here?'

Since he was wearing khadi clothes, he was an object of curiosity for Rahmatullah. Moreover, he had never seen Jagan Acharya at the haveli before. Instead of answering the question, he asked :

'May I know where you're from?'

Jagan Acharya did not answer the question, so Rahmatullah led him into the haveli. Chhote Rai sat directly ahead, Tilak's *Gītā Rahasya* in his hands. When he saw a khadi-clad figure marching into the haveli, he stood up. They were days when, no matter how important a person you were, if you saw a khadi-wearing figure, your head bowed in reverence. Chhote Rai had also sensed that the visitor wanted to meet him, for if there was anyone in the haveli who could have had a visitor such as this, it was only him.

Jagan Acharya said with folded hands :

'I am Jagan. Kala is my cousin.'

Chhote Rai had heard of him when he was in the Congress. He also knew that Kala had a cousin called Jagan Acharya, who was a leading figure in the Congress and a close associate of Gandhi. Seeing him standing before him threw Chhote Rai into a turmoil. Unwittingly, his hands moved to touch Jagan Acharya's feet, but Jagan took his hands in his own and said : 'What are you doing? It's me who must touch your feet.'

'I'm not touching your feet. I'm only trying to get close to the favour you have earned from Gandhiji. I've heard that you've sacrificed everything to be with him. I once had a fleeting encounter with a similar opportunity.'

Jagan was looking at him. It was with the greatest difficulty that Chhote Rai was able to control his exulting spirits.

'Yes, I too once had the opportunity to meet and talk to Gandhiji. He invited me to work for the country, but I couldn't muster courage enough. A weak man isn't capable of doing either good or evil. That's what I am : a weak man. But to see you has been a blessing.'

Rahmatullah was all ears. He too was moved to touch Jagan's feet but controlled himself. Chhote Rai asked :

'When did you come?'

'I've just arrived. I need some help. Where's Bhaskar Babu?'

'He is on his round of the zamindari. Will be back by evening.'

'And Kala?'

'She's in the house. I'll have you escorted there, but if there's anything I can do for you, please tell me. Bhaskar is my nephew.'

Jagan Babu looked at Rahmatullah.

'Rahmatullah and Bhaskar are the same to us. Please don't hesitate. You can speak freely.'

He stopped for a minute, then said :

'I'm underground. All the leaders are in jail. I'm looking for a safe haveli from where I can direct the movement.'

It was on the tip of Chhote Rai's tongue to say 'You can stay here,' but the words didn't come out, and his face fell. The thought, for the first time ever, occurred to him : It's not my house! It belongs to Bade Rai! But he recovered quickly and said :

'Please go and see Kala. My brother will be back soon. I'll discuss the matter with him, and I'm, sure we can make some arrangement.'

The alternating expressions on Chhote Rai's face did not escape Jagan Babu's sharp eyes.

'It's perfectly all right. You needn't trouble yourself,' he said laughing.

Chhote Rai called out to Rani, and told her to escort Jagan Babu inside.

'He's your bhabhi's brother. An important man. He has studied in England. Escort him to Kala.'

Rani was wide-eyed. She led the way, and the moment she reached the stairs, she raced upstairs, shouting : 'Bhabhi, bhabhi, your brother is here!'

The moment Kala saw her brother, she fell into his arms.

'Jagan Bhaiya, what have you done to yourself? How's bhabhi? I hear she too has joined the movement. I saw her only once with you at the station. Was it for this that you went to England to study?'

Jagan held his sister close to him and laughed.

'So many questions! Where do I begin? Not everyone is as lucky as you, Kala. We're both soldiers in Gandhi's non-violent war. There's no rest for us till every Indian is like me, or you.'

Kala got a light repast ready for him and waited on him while he washed his hands and feet. Suddenly, the baby let out a cry and Jagan pricked up his ears.

'Kala, I didn't know you could be so shy. . . You have

questioned me so closely, but didn't let out that you. . .'

Kala blushed.

'Go and bring the baby to me— is it a he or a she?'

'She.'

'Oh, so you've given birth to another Sarojini Naidu!'

Kala brought the baby and put it on his lap. He said laughing: 'I have nothing to give her, Kala; I'm her māmā only in name. Whenever Bapu writes us a letter, he closes by saying 'Bapu's blessings.' I too have nothing to give her except blessings— lots and lots of blessings. His voice trembled a little as he covered her head protectively with his hand.

Kala sensed the depression in him and changed the topic : 'What brought you here today, Jagan Bhai?' she asked.

'Tell me first : are you happy?'

'I'm happy all right, but not free. If I were free, I'd go with you and seek Gandhiji's blessings. There's nothing I lack here— I have everything: purdah, restrictions, do's and don'ts, untouchability . . . but of course they all respect me as long as I accept their terms. You've seen me at home living like a girl. Here I'm a bahu, a caged mynah. When the country is free will the women be free too?'

'When freedom comes, it must come indoors too. If it doesn't, it might as well not come.'

Kala fell silent. The baby had gone to sleep. Jagan māmā caressed her hair. A bit hesitant, Kala said :

'You've been tight-lipped too, Jagan Bhai.'

He laughed. 'Where's the time? I'm at large, but your bhabhi is in jail.'

No one spoke for some time. Then she asked again :

'You didn't answer my question. What brought you here?'

'I was passing this way. Thought I should look you up. Should've brought something for you— but what can you expect from a *fakir* of a brother?' He got up.

Kala tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen.

Bade Rai was back. The case was presented before him. Both

Chhote Rai and Rahmatullah were with him.

When Rahmatullah saw Jagan Acharya coming down the stairs, he went out and told him that the master was back.

'He doesn't' know me.'

'Do meet him, huzūr. He's man of love.'

'Not 'huzūr', 'brother.' He replied, and continued :

'Yes, but I am a dreary man.'

'I know everything. Chhote Rai has told me everything.'

As he kept walking, Rahmatullah urged again : 'Do meet him please.'

'Some other time. It'll cause him unnecessary embarrassment. I want to leave with the sweet taste of my meeting with Kala and her daughter lingering in me.'

'He'll be sorry that you left without meeting him,' said Rahmatullah. It was very unusual for Rahmatullah to insist, but he was feeling quite at ease with Jagan Acharya.

'Well, if you say so,' Jagan finally yielded.

Bade Rai was pacing the room. Jagan greeted him with folded hands. Bade Rai looked up and couldn't take his eyes away. Then he asked with great fondness :

'I hope you had something to eat.'

'Quite a lot. Kala wouldn't accept a no. I was on my way back. Thought I'd pay my respects to you, good for little else that I am. Our friend here,' he pointed to Rahmatullah, 'also thought I should.' He paused a little, then resumed : 'Kala is a very good girl. It has been ages since I saw her last. Actually, I haven't seen my uncle either for a very long time, or Padam. I hardly stop anywhere— always on the move. When I went to England, uncle came to Bombay to see me off. Padam and Kala were small then. Kala was very boyish. Well, I must go now. . . I really must not impose on you too much. . .'

'Actually. . .'

'I know. I was passing by here, thought maybe Kala. . . I quite forgot that she herself is no longer free. . .'

And without waiting for a reply, he folded his hands in farewell and strode out. Chhote Rai followed him. Outside, he took

Jagan's hands in his, and wouldn't let him go. Tears streamed from his eyes. He found it impossible to utter a word. With great difficulty, he managed to say : 'Next time you see Gandhiji and pay your respects to him, think of this wretch too. That'll be blessing enough for me.'

When Jagan came out of the house, he heard bangles. He looked up to the balcony of the house. A pair of eyes were bidding him farewell from behind the screen.

Jagan shot out of the gate and disappeared into the lane which was right opposite. Rahmatullah followed him. Jagan, intent on a quick escape, did not notice him at first. When he eventually saw him at his next backward glance, he stopped and asked him :'Why are you following me?'

'I'm a Muslim. A tailor by profession. Ex-coachman of Bade Rai. Not fit to tie your shoelaces, or to offer you my house for your stay. I have only one desire : To have this wretch's house blessed with the dust of your shoes. I live a long way out of the town, in Mohalla Khatikan. My wife was a Hindu— is still a very devout one.'

Jagan Acharya stared at him. He hadn't finished.

'Night is falling. Where can you go in the dark? You carry such a big responsibility. Please come with me— you'll redeem my life. The place is a bit cramped, but very safe.'

Jagan saw in his eyes the inviting look that he had seen when he had first met Gandhi. He turned about and followed Rahmatullah, who set off at a tremendous speed. Jagan stayed with him for a few days. He would leave the house before dawn and return late at night. Mostly his meals too were taken outside. Rahmatullah's wife would however pack some snacks with him when he left the house, which he ate with great relish. She also smeared the dust of his feet on her forehead, to which Jagan reacted strongly, and told Rahmatullah to forbid her to do it. 'I don't like it. I'm not a sadhu or a saint.' One day he spoke to her directly and her reaction was :

'Ahalya touched Ram's feet, and from a stone turned into a

human. I'm no better than a stone. Who knows, touching these noble feet, I might some day become a human too.'

Often he disappeared for days on end. Rahmatullah didn't mind; only wished him well. His wife cleaned up his room and lighted incense. She had also stitched a khadi shirt and a pair of loose trousers for him. When he wanted to pay, she fell at his feet. He had to withdraw.

One day Jagan Acharya just vanished into the thin air. Rahmatullah offered prayers for him everyday and his wife maintained her routine. Later the news came that he was in jail. A man turned up from nowhere, whispered it into Rahmatullah's ears that he was in Mathura Jail, and vanished. Rahmatullah looked everywhere but there was no trace of him. His wife cried and cried. She wouldn't perhaps have shed so many tears even for Kishen Babu.

I returned that night to be told how Jagan Acharya had been in and out. For some time I couldn't make up my mind whether what had happened was right or wrong. Kala was tight-lipped, but her heart was anguished. For her, it was clearly wrong that Jagan Acharya had not been offered even a night's hospitality. Rahmatullah did not let the matter of his stay with him be known for a long time. My grown up son once went and stayed with his māmā. He had then asked him : 'Is Rahmatullah living or. . .?'

When Jagan learnt that Rahmatullah had died a few days before independence came, he sat stricken for a long time. He then inquired about his wife only to be told that she too had passed away.

'Children?'

They had died childless. The wife had always begged Rahmatullah for a child but he had always laughed it off.

Jagan was curious on one more point. 'Was she a courtesan once?' he had wanted to know. My son had no knowledge of this. Then Jagan Babu told him the whole story. After independence, Jagan babu occupied various important positions in the government. We went to him regularly for favours. I wonder now how he must

have looked upon the episode at the haveli after all these years, but I certainly never heard him speak of it in a complaining way. I don't know why I brought up this matter here. It is by putting in such capricious appearances, in context and out of it, that my memories keep playing games with me.

Kala's report did bother me. I asked Chhote Rai, but he was even more despondent. 'By turning him away from our doorstep, we have committed a sin. He was your brother-in-law, if nothing other. We'll have to pay for this sin. A house is not only for its owners to live in— part of it also belongs to the guests. Any guests dropping in must share the feeling of being at home, like the ones who are living there. Our mother used to say we must keep our eyes open for God. He can walk in any time, in any guise. If he drops in and we miss Him, we'll never be able to live it down. We'll never find Him again. He does not pay repeat visits. And here we knew He stood before us in the shape of Jagan Babu, and we didn't even offer Him a seat.'

'Why didn't you stop him,' I asked.

'Who could've stopped him? Much before anyone came to the point where one could stop him he'd decided this house was not for him. When he went to see Bade Rai, he'd already decided he had to leave. Nor was he stopped. For the first time in my life, I was face to face with my helplessness. A famous Gandhian like Jagan Babu walked out of this house, and we looked at him as at one we knew but were afraid to recognize. But that did not make him unhappy. He was above joy and sorrow and attachment. Rahmatullah followed him out— I couldn't muster even that much courage. I think I have lost even my badge of humanity.'

I wanted to ask Rahmatullah too, but he wouldn't say anything. Raising his hands in a meaningless gesture, he simply walked out of the haveli.

I wasn't destined to enjoy Kala's company for long. I found out later that Kala had been suffering silently. Her idea of happiness was altogether different. When she got married she had an outline of her life sketched in her mind. Her purpose in marrying me was

to fill out that outline with bright colours of various shades. But after marriage she saw bright colours, on the carpets, wall-pictures, furniture, curtains and clothes, but none in her life, or in the lives around her. A smoky twilight colour covered everything. The sketch remained unfilled, but she didn't complain. The same smoky colour, like an ever-enlarging shadow, gradually enveloped her inner being. Passively, she watched herself beating her wings in the void. . . It is possible that in some lonely moments she spread out the sketch before her, looked at its fading lines, and maybe even wiped the dust on it with a corner of her sari— I was never to find out.

As the struggle for freedom intensified, a dark cloud of despair enveloped the zamindars, the jagirdars, and the talukdars. Their grip on the social order was weakening and the towers of prestige were sinking. The English, while still keeping the stiff upper lip, and all the pomp of the empire, were beginning to feel the rising hollow inside. It wasn't only the upperclass, however, that was passing through a period of uncertainty; the lower classes too were groping in the dark. No one knew what was going to happen. The 'Do or Die' movement had produced results which the English had never thought possible. They were beginning to panic. That Gandhi's *ahimsā* could take such forms, that, challenging death, it could become so fierce a force as to give rise to an uncontrollable anarchy all over the country had been unthinkable. Chhote Rai was exulting inwardly. As Gandhi tightened his grip on society and on the ongoing struggle, Chhote Rai reacted positively. He may not be part of the struggle, he felt, but he was inextricably involved with it. One result of this exultation and positive reaction was to insulate him further from his other responsibilities, and those too were now thrust on me. My work had increased so much that sometimes I had to stay in the zamindari for days at a stretch. A movement for non-payment of revenue had started in the provinces, and we were worried that it might spread to our zamindari. To be sure, in comparison with the eastern districts, people in the western districts were more docile, and more prone to flatten themselves before government authority, but the struggle against authority was

catching on, and we couldn't rest on our oars. We had to hire more revenue collectors. There was a time when it was assumed that even a dog sent out from the haveli to collect the revenue would return with all the revenue tied around its neck. Now we had to send men in groups of three or four to collect it. The rigours of revenue collection had really mounted.

My long absences from home upset Kala. Rani was now grown up, and Arun too was no longer a child. Chhoti Chachi was becoming increasingly absorbed in Arun, but there was an emptiness in her soul, a psychic vaccuum, which manifested itself more and more in an obsession with cleanliness, purity, and restrictions on touchability. Although she did play with my latest-born daughter, Sona, she also maintained a distance on this account. If Sona wetted the floor, the whole room had to be washed and cleaned. Kala minded this very much. She tried to keep Sona from going to Chachi, but once she started crawling, one couldn't always keep track of her. Chachi loved to play with her, but would not stand for her wettings and soilings. Every morning, before she had her bath, she would of course play with her. In fact, she played and played till she was lost to the world. All her mother's affection was concentrated on Sona. But no sooner she had her bath, she was washed clean of all affection.

On one occasion, Kala let drop a careless remark. If you don't have kids of your own, she said, you are likely to get obsessed with this fear of being defiled and polluted. She was probable reacting to the treatment Sona received after Chachi's bath hours. Particularly as contrasted with her attitude to Arun. Chachi insisted on Arun calling her 'Ma'. That word swept Chachi off her feet. She would clasp Arun to herself so tightly that it seemed she wanted to become physically one with him. Arun felt suffocated. I also found it distasteful. In fact, I spoke to Arun about it once or twice, which Chachi didn't like at all. Kala's remark had become a sore point with her. Kala had to apologize and explain that she had had no intention of hurting her feelings. But Chachi maintained a posture of hurt silence.

There was palpable tension in the house after the incident.

Raghubar was due. (You remember him? I mentioned him earlier too, because he is an inseparable part of my sensibility.) Kala was unduly anxious this time. She kept expressing the fear that she may not survive the delivery. Who'd look after her kids then? After Sona, we had iost two infants. That was quite common then. A mother who survived childbirth was considered to have been granted a second life. Safe delivery was an occasion for congratulations–that the mother had come out of it in one piece. With every delivery, a woman had a new life. Chhoti Chachi, in fact, used to say : 'To be born and to live uninterrupted till death! That's no life. Safe delivery was a occasion for congratulations—that the mother had come out of it in one piece. With every delivery, a woman had a new life. Chhoti Chachi, in fact, used to say : 'To be born and to live uninterrupted till death! That's no life for a woman! A woman must die and be born again, and again, and again!'

Daughters-in-law in houses such as ours too had to suffer this fate, though we could afford the best possible care. When the lady doctor examined Kala, she told us in Kala's presence : The baby has an abnormally large head. She may have to be taken to Delhi for delivery. This had Kala worried all the more. She had convinced herself that there would be no return trip from Delhi for her. She would pray to Bhavani to look after her children after she was no more. 'Look after them as you looked after Rani and Arun. Rani will be gone one day to her husband's, but you'll always be here. And she would tell me : 'I know when I die another will take my place. I only pray to you not to be unkind to my kids! Spare them the fate of motherless kids!'

When I tried to dismiss such talk, she would insist : 'I know for sure there'll be another. You always need a woman to run the household. It's strange : a man dies and no one ever worries about his sprawling affairs in the world outside; a woman dies and everyone is sick with worry about the tiny household!'

I remember I had taken objection to that remark. She had overstepped the limits, and I gave her a piece of my mind. She listened to me in silence, then said : 'I didn't know it would upset

you so much. But why? For me it's the end of a life of bondage. Now I'll be able to scale the heights of the sky— even if with one wing outspread over my children. I'll nevertheless fly!'

That put a scare in me. It reminded me of what they said had happened to Kala's stepmother. I can't of course vouch for the truth of the story, but the story itself is without parallel in my experience. I never heard anything like it before or since. It seemed to me for a moment that Kala was hinting at a re-run of the story. Of course, the re-run would be possible only when, God forbid, she was no more.

Kala's father had told me at our very first meeting that he had been married twice. The first wife died within two years of marriage. When Padam, Kala's older brother, was born, the first wife started visiting the son. When I was first told of this, I didn't quite figure out how a dead person could have come back. But apparently she did. She would come and sit at the head of Padam's bed and stay there for the whole day. Padam was a handsome baby. When he grew up, he used to play female roles in plays and had the public eating out of his hands. No one who didn't know him could make out that he was a boy. It was usual for boys to play female roles then, except of course in commercial theatre companies where women were specially hired for the purpose. But let me come back to Kala's stepmother. If Kala's mother had anything which didn't agree with the child, the stepmother would come out with something like :

'I know you ate chanā. Now see what you've done. The baby's sick. Get some asfoetida heated and rub it on his navel.'

The mother would do as told, and invariably the baby was restored in no time, and sleeping soundly. Or she would say :

'That's the evil eye he has got. You took him out somewhere, didn't you? Go and get the evil-eye removed.'

Sometimes she came out with things which could have been known only to Kala's mother. I heard these stories patiently, though I could never figure out things like : How come she could be heard but not seen? What was her voice mechanism? And so on. It was considered sacrilegious to express doubts over such matters then,

so I said nothing. When Padam was grown up and got married, the usual food gifts were made to everyone entitled to receive them at his wedding. But they somehow forgot the stepmother. Next morning, they found all the sweets which were laid out in the store in earthen dishes, trampled underfoot. Footmarks could be seen on all of them. Inquiries were made, but no one knew anything. Moreover, the store had been locked, and the key had been with Kala's father all the time. The mystery was resolved when Kala's stepmother volunteered and said : 'I did it.'

'Why did you do it?'

'Nobody thought of me at my own son's wedding, that's why. Who brought him up? Who spent night after night sitting by his bed? Who shooed off the spirits when they hovered over him? This woman? She spent all the nights sleeping. And nobody even thought of me!'

Fresh sweets were ordered at once. Food offerings were made to her. Five items of clothing including a dhoti and a shirt were gifted to a married woman surrogate for her. It was only then that she was pacified. Later, when the bride entered the house, Kala's father told his first wife : 'I think you should stop your visits now. The children are grown up and easily scared. We won't ever forget to keep your share for you, I promise!'

That's when her visits stopped. When Kala talked about her death, I was reminded of her tale. In my heart of hearts, I was never convinced that there was any truth in it. I considered it a total fabrication. Women are no less adept at making up such stories than story writers. On one occasion, however, Kala's father also corroborated the story. I was still not convinced, but certainly began to wonder. Bhavani too was full of such absurd tales. I never believed them. In the District Courts compound in our town, there are two tamarind trees. One of them is known as the Bloody Tamarind. It is said that passing under it at night you can hear an English voice asking for tea and biscuits, but if you make the mistake of stopping, the ghost takes your life. The story was that during the Mutiny the natives had killed an Englishman tying him to the Bloody Tamarind. Later a grave was dug and a memorial

stone was set up on the spot. I also had occasion to pass that way once or twice, but that Englishman never asked me for tea and biscuits. If he had, I would certainly have offered him some.

I joked with Kala : 'Do you intend to bring up these kids *in absentia* like your stepmother?'

'There's a difference between me and my stepmother— she never became a mother. I guess I could get by just leaving my blessings behind— I don't have to come back myself. But, of course, it would be a different matter if Rupa decided to come back!'

'With all your education and learning, you still talk like that?'

'Education and learning? But I had those even at the time I came into this house. Some of it was sacrificed to the high walls of the haveli, the rest is being taken care of by the uncertainty of life and the ties that bind me to the kids.'

There was nothing for me to say after this.

We had to take Kala to Delhi. As long as she stayed at the hospital, she was obsessed with her death. She spent most of her time explaining to the maid who had accompanied her where in the house they would find the things such as Sona's dresses. Or she would be telling her what the things were that Sona liked, what her habits were, what time she went to bed, what time she got up, and so on. When she was being taken into the operation theatre, she reached for my hands and said :

'This is farewell. You won't see me again. But my son will live. He'll be the pride of the family. Ask Bade Rai to keep him under his wing. And don't be harsh to the kids. Give the motherless pups all the love you can— for me too. Let them not be unhappy, or else no one will ever be happy in the house. . .' She was getting more and more emotional every moment.

Outwardly she was composed. The words came out without any trace of agitation. When her trolley entered the operation theatre, two tear drops emerged from the eyes as the doors swung shut. I stood there, watching in my mind's eye the trolley rolling on and on, while the tear drops, unable to roll down, perched precariously on the edges of her eyes. My hands rose involuntarily

when I suddenly realized that I wasn't alone. Chhote Rai and Padam sat beside me. Chhote Rai placed a hand on my shoulder and patted it in a comforting gesture. Padam sat still. His only sister was lying on the operation table. Minutes ticked by. We got more and more restless, more and more impatient. With every passing moment, we were being seized by a numbing sense of helplessness.

The doors were pushed open from inside. A European doctor emerged :

'Congratulations! A son.' And she marched off.

Then a senior nurse came out, looking European. I rushed to her side.

'How's the mother?' I asked.

'Too early to say anything. There's been a lot of bleeding. We'll know when she regains consciousness.'

'There's blood. . .'

But she pit-patted away without listening. No feeling in that pit-pat. Like a typewriter which taps out words whose significance and emotions escape it completely, the pit-patting feet also gave no indication that they appreciated the importance for us of the patient left lying on the table. Every pit and every pat kicked up a dust of lifeless silence which lingered behind the uncaring heels. We waited there for hours. Every now and then Padam let out hoarsely :

'My only sister. . .'

I was silent. What could have I said? Padam's words chorused noisily in my mind, like a chatter of chirpy birds, and Kala's recent utterances got all mixed up in the din.

Then suddenly I turned to Padam and asked :

'When you were young, did your stepmother come and sit by your side?' I didn't know what had come over me.

He looked at me like a lawyer in a courtroom and asked :

'Why are you asking?'

'For the kids.'

'I don't understand.

'To find out how far a mother will go for her kids.'

He hummed and then said : 'I had heard. The only incident

I remember was the one that took place at my wedding. We were much younger then.'

'Yes, Kala told me. Your father too.'

He again repeated the same sentence : 'My only sister. . . Do you think she'll pull through?'

I wanted to tell him that every sister is an only sister; in fact, every relation is an only relation, and is confined to the person with whom we have that relation, but suddenly the junior nurse came out and said :

'She's come round. Would you like to see her?'

I was the first one to go in, though earlier I had thought Chhote Rai should go in first. But the proximity principle prevailed. Next was Padam, Chhote Rai last. This order was agreed upon by us unanimously without uttering a word. She opened her eyes and saw me. Then she turned her eyes to the baby in the crib. It was one of those hospitals where the mother wasn't allowed the baby till after twenty-four hours had passed. The baby was healthy and slept with its legs spread. It gave a hint of a smile. I smiled back. She muttered :

'My job's done. I've given you a son.'

I shook my head. 'No,' I said, 'It's not done. It's just begun.'

The tear drops rolled down her eyes. I had a feeling these were the same tears, waiting to come loose. Like the last two leaves on an autumn tree fluttering down to the ground. With them gone, the tree was no longer a tree.

She beckoned me closer and said :

'I want to feed the child. . . just once.'

'Sure, sure, You'll feed him.'

'No, there isn't time.'

'What are you saying?'

'Tell them to let me feed the child just once.'

Her brother and Chhote Rai too had appeared by now. Chhote Rai caressed her forehead. She gestured to me to cover her forehead with the sari. Chhote Rai was beside himself with emotion : 'Don't worry! You're like Rani. . . my daughter.'

Padam stood on the other side, holding one of her hands and

gazing at her face silently. Kala spoke to Chhote Chacha.

'Please tell them to put my child by my side.'

Then she turned to her brother.

'Tell father I kept my promise. Stayed the way they kept me; lived the way they wanted. Now it's time. . .

Padam broke down.

For twenty-four hours Kala longed and craved and begged to be allowed to feed the baby. She would lapse into a coma at regular intervals. I didn't move from her side. Chhote Rai and Padam kept coming in and going out. Padam tried to persuade me to take a break and rest awhile. He wanted to sit beside her. As her brother, that was his right, but since he was younger to me, he didn't insist. I didn't want to leave Kala's side even for a moment. I don't know why. Every now and then she wanted to see Sona. She kept asking for her and worrying what she might have to face after her death. Chhoti Chachi and Sona had also arrived by the evening.

Now Kala was running fever. Doctors wanted us to make her drink five seers of water during the night. That was the only possible chance of survival, they said. I found out from the nurse later that someone had goofed and left the lancet on the table during the operation. The seer was the only measure in use then, both for solids and liquids. I tried to make her take water every half hour with a feeding bottle. Sometimes she took it quietly, at other times she resisted. By morning, I had been able to force her to drink about three and a half seers. Micturition was also quite satisfactory. The fever had gone down from four to one and a half degrees when the doctor came on his morning round. The doctor was happy, but around four o'clock she stopped taking water. The doctor was immediately sent for. Kala was insistent that her son should be given to her. The doctors said she had septic, which could infect the baby if she fed him. Bade Rai had been informed, and he arrived by seven in the morning. He looked very pale. The night-long train journey and the unshaven beard may have had something to do with it. He took one look at Kala and knew that the end was near. The doctor knew too, but was tight-lipped. Bade Rai told the European doctor to allow the child to be taken to the mother.

'He might get the infection,' said the doctor.

'Whatever is to happen will happen, doctor. Neither you nor we can change the destiny. I can give you written permission, if that'll help. But if my bahu leaves the world pining for her child, we'll never be able to forgive ourselves. And her soul will never rest in peace.'

It took nearly two hours of argument and counter-argument for the doctor to relent. She could not understand how an educated and intelligent man like Bade Rai could be so unreasonable and superstitious. Bade Rai tried to explain to her that, being Hindus, for us the soul was part of our beliefs. The soul of a person dying with his last wish unfulfilled wanders about in the universe unable to reincarnate. To be a Hindu is to believe in reincarnation. The doctor simply laughed.

When the baby was laid by her side, Kala was conscious. She at once clasped the baby to her breast. The next moment her grip on the baby relaxed. She struggled to put the baby to her breast, but failed. Her hands rolled away.

Sona stood staring at her mother and her brother, puzzled.

The nurse came running. The doctor was sent for again. She took the patient's pulse, shook her head slowly and said 'Sorry!' Bade Rai supported himself on the side of the bed, both his hands outspread as if a jutting overhang had broken the fall of a big felled tree. The nurse took the child back to the crib. Chachi escorted Sona outside.

Someone produced a sheet and covered Kala's body with it.

We were strangers to Delhi. Our biggest problem was where to cremate the body. Should we take the body home or cremate it locally? Transporting the body home would have meant problems as the means were not available then. So we decided to cremate the body locally— at the banks of the Jamuna. Although Hindus generally consider it her good fortune for a dead woman's pyre to be lit by her husband, we followed a strange practice in our family : the husband was forbidden to accompany his wife's dead body to the cremation site. There could be several possible reasons for

this practice : maybe it was a corollary of child-marriage. Since death could overtake one at any age, it may have been thought unwise to expose a child to the trauma of a cremation; or it may be that some time in the past a husband accompanied the body to the cremation ground and himself succumbed to death after some time. Whatever be the reason, I had to stay back with Sona at the place we had rented. A nurse had been arranged for the baby and she too was there along with Chhoti Chachi.

There were only three males : Bade Rai, Chhote Rai and Padam. Jamuna river was a long way off. A hearse was arranged. A family from Bombay was staying next to us. They too had come for someone's treatment. Two men from the family also joined the cremation party. They were finding it very strange that the husband did not accompany the body. On the other hand, I was shedding tears over my helplessness. Sona kept looking at me and asked : 'Why do you have water in your eyes, Babuji? Where've they taken Ma? Won't Ma ever come back?' The word 'Ma' was enough to throw me off balance and waves of emotion carried me away. I was at a loss what to say to the child. Chhoti Chachi also found herself frustrated trying to divert Sona's thoughts. The last hours of Kala kept forcing themselves on my thoughts. She had been preparing for the final leave-taking and the moment the child was returned to her, she left.

Sona pulled my face towards her and asked : 'When'll Ma return?' I almost said 'Never' : then, recovering quickly, retrieved the situation.

'She's gone to the big doctor. When she's fully recovered, the big doctor will let her go, but not before that.'

'When'll she recover fully?'

I didn't speak.

She then pointed to the baby asleep in the nurse's lap.

'Why didn't she take him with her? It's her baby, isn't it?'

'He's your little brother. She has left him for you to play with.'

'But he's a horror. He's always crying.' Then she turned to me and said, lisping a little :

'You're crying too.'

Chhoti Chachi called her : 'Come, Sona, come to me. Don't bother your papa.'

'No, I won't,' she said warming her way deeper into my lap.

It was evening. Everything was bathed in the subdued light of the setting sun. The surfaces gleamed. Little by little the gleam was lost and a muddy colour enveloped everything. A discoloured slice of the returning sun slid quickly past where we sat like a mischievous boy trying to sneak out of a room with a stolen sweet. The people who all day long hurried through the corridors now walked with heavier steps. The shouts of the children seemed to have moved farther away. Nothing was clear to me. I wondered if my senses were benumbed, or the things were truly receding away from me.

I came out with Sona. Outside, the air was stiller and everything looked duller.

Bade Rai, Chhote Rai, Padam and the other two men dismounted the tonga. I felt my eyes and ears choked with huge quantities of dust as if a large building had come hurtling down around me. When Rupa died, I didn't even know. Who knows how I would have felt then had I been present? But Kala had gone out like a lamp right before my eyes. As if a naughty child had blown it out. Bade Rai and Chhote Rai floundered in like a large crippled ship. Padam brought up the rear with bags and things. The two in front walked ready to lend a hand to each other, need arising.

I took out a groundsheet from the bed and spread it on the floor. It was customary to sit on the floor and nibble at a neem leaf returning from a cremation. They all came and sat on the groundsheet. They had brought along a twig of neem with them. They all nibbled at a leaf each, then got up. Possibly the men from Bombay didn't have this custom. They made strange faces while munching neem. It seemed to me from their wry faces that the neem leaf perhaps symbolised the bitter taste which the loss of, or the mere fear of losing, a dear one leaves in the mouth.

As they were leaving, I offered my good wishes to them :

'May your patient get well and you return home soon.' As I said these words, my voice cracked. One of them took my hand in his and stood with me for a while. Perhaps the bitter taste of neem had left his mouth.

With me on this side and Majhhale Rai on the other looking after the work of the zamindari, occasional clashes arose sometimes over water and field boundaries, and at other times over servants and labourers. Bonded labour was a highly prized commodity— higher prized than even land. The bonded labourers were the object of a lot of horse trading. For five hundred rupees and some annual payment in grain, people would sell themselves as hāalīs (Ploughmen) to you. These hālīs were also bonded labour of sorts. with increased horse trading, the price of hālīs was going up and up. The other party would pay a couple of hundred rupees more and steal your hālīs from under your nose. The hālīs were the main reason for our clashes. They usually occurred when we happened to come face to face in one of our few shared villages.

Majhhale Rai was considerably cheesed off with us now. The change in his attitude was especially noticeable after Kala's death. While Majhhali Chachi had called on us a few times, Majhhale Chacha came only once— on the thirteenth day rites— to fill in a formality. He put his hand on my shoulder and said exactly one sentence :

'Your Chachi and me are deeply grieved by Kala's death; but death is all powerful and we are all helpless before it.'

He didn't speak to Bade Rai, but had a word or two with Chhote Rai, who was frank and unsparing :

'What has come over you Majhhale Bhaiya? Death tears our hearts out and all you can think of is moving formal resolutions. Don't you think you should spend a few days with us?'

He kept quiet at first, then issued a rejoinder :

'Don't you think by coming here I did more than what Bade Rai did? He didn't even respond to my invitation.'

'You never came to invite him.'

'But I sent a card.'

'By the same token, you should've sent a condolence message today. Is a card all that your own people deserve?'

'Your own people' don't even need to wait for a card, that is, if they are really 'your own people.'

Chhote Rai realized that this was no occasion for a lengthy debate on the topic, so he fell silent.

Majhhale Rai then inquired about Sona and Raghubar. 'How are the kids?' he asked.

'All right, so far,' I said.

Majhhali Chachi wanted to gift two silver rupees to Raghubar. Chhoti Chachi stopped her : 'Some other time, didi; this is no occasion to gift anything to a child who has lost his mother.'

'It's all right for you since you're always here. I'm an occasional visitor.'

Though Chhoti Chachi said nothing, she saw to it that the gift was not made. Majhhali Chachi left seething.

But I was telling you about the problems of our zamindari. These were pulling us— Majhhale Chacha and ourselves— farther and farther apart. On three or four occasions, Majhhale Rai had beaten up our tenants and labourers, to which we had taken exception. Relations between him and Bade Rai had broken down completely. Majhhale Rai had started remodelling the kothi occupied by him to suit his needs. Bade Rai did not like this at all. He had got the kothi built and designed specially for his British guests. As a result of his personal interest, the final result was considered to be one of the finest buildings in the town. Its finishing and furnishing reflected the same personal touch. The water fountains used were of a type unheard of in smaller towns. A row of these fountains in the centre of the drawing room was lighted up in various colours creating the impression that water of different colours was being used in the fountains. Wash basins had not come into use yet, but Bade Rai had arranged them to be procured. Hot and cold running water was provided from tanks. Running and maintaining these fancy installations was difficult as well as expensive for Majhhale Rai so he had started dismantling them. Putting all the family honour at stake, Bade Rai had to procure a

stay order from the court to stop the demolition. He was extremely unhappy over this, perhaps unhappier than he was at the death of his daughter-in- law. Death was God's will, but this was his own.

Majhhale Rai's own tenants and other subjects were getting disaffected from him because of his stubborn and unreasonable attitude. He would sometimes get their crops harvested or burnt and freshly sowed fields ploughed up. Besides, he was foul-mouthed and ill-mannered in his talk. He had a hālī, Mirchi Chamar. When Mirchi found it impossible to get along with Majhhale Rai he switched his loyalty to Bade Rai and started ploughing Bade Rai's fields. Majhhale Rai got so mad that he had him hauled to his camp and beaten up. If he had satisfied himself only with this, things wouldn't have got out of hand. But, rumour had it that he had a *bhangi* urinate into his mouth. Mirchi left quietly at the time but at home he called up his two sons and said; 'Go and take revenge. Or get a pyre ready for me to jump into. Those flames will be more soothing than the ones I burn in now.'

His wife tried to argue with him : 'Go an see Bade Rai. He is your real master. This is an insult to him too.'

'He's his own brother, and blood is always thicker that water. They call their tyranny punishment! Birds of a feather— only one more feathery than the other! No, I have two strapping sons— I'll appeal to them. Or I'll appeal to God! Even God may not listen, but you are listening, you, who are my sons. Tell me what I should do : should I jump into a pyre, or should I live?'

Both the sons said the same thing : 'Give us time, babu.' Blood was in their eyes. Mirchi looked into those eyes and said :

'I'll wait for your reply.'

Then one day, Ranjan, Majhhale Rai's adopted son, came into the haveli, crying. He asked Chhote Rai :

'Uncle, where's Tauji?'

'Why, son?'

'Papa went into the zamindari yesterday. He said he'd be back by evening, but there's no sign of him yet.'

Bade Rai was still at his pūjā. Chhote Rai told Ranjan to go

back home : 'You'll hear from us by this evening. We'll send someone to find out. It's quite possible he may have decided to visit some more places.'

I had just returned when Chhote Rai sent for me. Sona was growing up and beginning to show signs of some maturity. Raghubar could support himself, but was mostly clinging to me. Rani always suffered the most since she had the reponsibility for all of them; in particular, Sona was always attached to her. I wanted to go downstairs, but Raghubar wouldn't let me. So I went downstairs carrying him in my arms. Bade Rai was just emerging from his pūjā. The moment he set eyes on me, he hit the ceiling. Cracking his tongue like a whip, he lashed out at me :

'You dare to come before your elders carrying your kids in your arms! Have you lost all shame?'

I dropped Raghubar as if I had been caught carrying stolen goods. He fell down and started bawling. I watched him bawl but couldn't muster enough courage to pick him up again. Chhote Rai came running and picked him up, but he would only have me and was not pacified. I had turned my face away and didn't have the guts even to look at him. Chhote Rai called out to Bhavani and asked him to take Raghubar inside, which he did. Bade Rai was still fuming.

'I never picked up my kids in my arms. In the presence of my father and other elders, it was out of the question. And here you are, no less than an Englishman, shamelessly lugging your kids around.'

Chhote Rai intervened : 'Bhaskar, do you know where Majhhale Bhaiya is?'

I couldn't see the relevance of Majhhale Bhaiya to the situation in hand and must have looked puzzled, for he immediately provided a clarification :

'He hasn't returned since yesterday. His son was here crying and asking for Tauji.'

'Krishna's son? Asking for me?' echoed Bade Rai.

Chhote Rai didn't respond to his appeal for confirmation. Instead, he asked me : 'Did you have any hot words with him?'

I didn't like the implication of this and said a bit edgily :

'How can you say a thing like that? Wouldn't I tell you if I did?'

'Then I must go and look for him. He's a brother, after all.'

'But does he believe that?' said Bade Rai, his words steeped in agony.

Chhote Rai, who rarely opened his mouth in the presence of Bade Rai, only repeated himself. 'A brother is a brother,' he said.

When he saw Chhote Rai going, Bade Rai asked me to go with him. We took out our guns and ammunition and directed our coachman to drive into Majhhale Rai's zamindari. We were tense and worried. Rumours had it that since the Mirchi incident people were agitated and we were also included in their wrath. Mirchi had suffered his fate because he had deserted Majhhale Rai to join us. The fear that they might have chosen to retaliate kept preying on our minds, although times had not yet changed so much that the lower castes would dare to raise a finger against the zamindars. The British rule was, after all, still in place.

As our coach turned into a narrow dirt track, I thought I heard someone call out my name and crying for help. As I peered closely into the clump of trees beside the road, I saw the ragged and half-clad figure of Majhhale Rai hiding behind a tree. His eyes and cheeks were swollen. I was staggered to see him in this condition. His zamindari was still about five miles from the place. He had reached here on foot, concealing himself from public view. His eyes might have fallen on me first. I quickly went to him. He immediately collapsed into my arms as if he had been waiting for someone to arrive. We bore him to the coach with the help of the coachman, but still the coachman had to reverse the coach holding the reins of the horse to come closer to where we were. When we were back on the main road, he set up a fast pace for home.

Majhhali Chachi was very upset and had despatched servants in all directions. On Chhote Rai's instructions, Chhoti Chachi had also arrived to be by her side so as not to leave her alone in distress.

When she saw Majhhale Rai, Majhhali Chachi set up a wail the like of which is usually heard only when one sets eyes on the dead body of a near and dear one. Chhote Rai was put off by her high-pitched howls and even ventured a remark : 'What are these howls for, bhabhi? By God's grace, Majhhale Bhaiya is back unharmed. You should in fact be relieved.'

Majhhale Bhai was very reticent about what had transpired: The only thing that he let out was that he had been waylaid by some hoodlums, but the way he fidgeted and squirmed, it was clear that he was suffering from deep anxiety. Keeping his lips sealed was proving too much of an effort for him. To boot, the face was swollen, eyes deep black and forehead streaked in blue. He was finding it difficult to lift his hands. Legs had stiffened.

We stayed with him for nearly three hours. All this time a storm raged within him. Like a snake whose head you have in your tight grip, his spirit lashed about in a fierce frenzy. Majhhali Chachi had gone absolutely still, not a word escaping her even to Chhoti Chachi. Their son, Ranjan, terrified, sat alone outside.

When he refused to open his mouth for a long time, we came away. He had not even allowed us to call the doctor.

Nothing had changed. Strangers we had gone in, strangers we came out.

Majhhale Rai filed a case in the court of law against Mirchi and his family under Section 307.

Majhhale Rai had been delayed at work that evening and he had decided to spend the night at the camp. He had a Gurkha bodyguard, who was his right hand. It was part of the Gurkha's duties to collect the dues from the farmers. In addition, he also served as his masseur. Cruelty dripped from his face. And, despite everything, he was the most loyal attendant Majhhale Rai had.

Majhhale Rai slept with the window open. He liked to see the sky. And on that night too the window was open, but the door was closed. In the nearby guard's cabin slept the Gurkha.

They entered through the window. Majhhale Rai woke up at the first noise and could make out some figures at the window.

'Who is there?' he asked.

'It's us. Fatta and Chandan. Mirchi's sons.'

'What do you want?'

To settle scores. For what you did to our father.'

They jumped into the room. Mirchi's daughter stood beneath the window outside. Mirchi and his wife stood guard at the Gurkha's cabin.

This did not worry Majhhale Rai much. He was still hoping that a little bullying will send them scurrying.

'Settle scores with me? I'll see you. . . I'll ruin you. . . When I'm through with you. . .

They kept advancing, quite unmindful of his words. When they didn't slow down, Majhhale Rai's voice wavered a little :

'What do you want?'

'Revenge. To do to you what you did to our father.'

Majhhale Rai couldn't utter another word. They grabbed him. He moved to retrieve his revolver from under his pillow, but Fatta seized his hand and twisted it hard. He cried out in pain. Then they stuffed cloth into his mouth and, unbolting the door, let in their father.

'Go ahead. Don't just stand there. Piss into his mouth!' They told their father.

'No, no, don't do this to him. It's a sin to do that. Whatever one may say, we have eaten his salt.'

The boys grabbed both the hands of their father and lifted his dhoti.

'When he had a *bhangi* piss into your mouth, you didn't think of sin and virtue! Now with his piss inside you, you are discoursing on right and wrong! Go on! Don't miss this chance! Piss!'

Mirchi couldn't. It wouldn't come. But the boys didn't give up. He tried hard and produced a few drops. It's hard to say if any of it entered Majhhale Rai's mouth or not, but his face was dripping wet. He was shaking his neck violently and trying to bring his palms together begging for release. But the mouth was stuffed and he couldn't produce a sound. Mirchi wanted to run away, but his sons wouldn't let him move.

'Go and get the scraper from the village and meet us in the fields. We'll skin him there.'

Mirchi tried to argue : 'You want to take his life and your own too? You'll be hanged.'

'Didn't you hear there are crazy people getting themselves hanged everyday for the country? So what if we are hanged for our father? Nobody'll miss us, but everybody will know, once and for all, that the honour of Mirchi Chamar is no less than his honour.'

They forced him to go to get the scraper. In the meantime, the mother had quietly slipped the bolt on the Gurkha's door. The two brothers tied up Majhhale Rai into a bundle using his own bedsheet and lowered the bundle out of the window on their sister's shoulders. It was a heavy bundle, and they were finding it difficult to keep it from falling down. Then they jumped out of the window, took charge of the bundle and hurried to the fields. At regular intervals, convulsions emanated from the bundle as if epilepsy had attacked it. Once in the fields, they untied the bundle. Majhhale Rai was in a daze, his glassy eyes turned upwards. Mother arrived just then, leaving the Gurkha sleeping soundly. When she saw the sight, she panicked.

'Stop it! If Majhhale Rai dies, everyone in the village will be roasted alive.'

'Let him die; we'll bury him in a pit somewhere,' said Chandan indifferently.

Mother splashed water on his face and he stirred, but didn't regain full consciousness. He muttered something. The daughter tried to listen carefully to what he was saying and said later that he heard something like 'Ranjan.' She didn't quite understand.

Mirchi had been gone a long time. The brothers began to worry. In another hour or so, the pre-dawn chatter of birds would begin. Once the village awakened, it would be difficult to keep him hidden. They spoke to their sister :

'Looks like his kind heart has caught up with Bapu again, and is holding him back. He doesn't understand that nothing can save us now : whether we kill him or let him go. Death is certain in either case. We'll go and get the scraper. You stay here with

mother and don't let him get away.'

Majhhale Rai was coming to. Just then mother went of to answer the call of nature. Majhhale Rai pointed to his mouth, and looked at her with pleading eyes. She hesitated at first, then took the stuffing out of his mouth.

Majhhale Rai pleaded to her with folded hands; 'You are like my daughter. As your godfather, I promise I'll never wrong anyone again. I have a small kid. If I am not home soon he'll cry himself to death. My brothers will not spare him either.'

The girl's heart melted. She quickly untied him. It was still pitch dark. Majhhale Rai's limbs were stiff, and he found it difficult to raise himself. She helped him up and said : 'My brothers have gone to get a scraper to skin you; mother is away answering the call of nature. Make good your escape while you can, and look sharp about it. If they catch you, you had it! I'll take care of mother. But let me tell you what you did to my father was not right. If I still let you go it's because my father has already forgiven you. Now, go!'

Majhhale Rai plunged into the pitch-black night. The girl supported him and guided him to the track. Thence onward, he fought the bushes, the low branches and the darkness, and he struggled, stumbled and staggered his way out, spurred on by the fear of the death that stalked him.

When they returned, Majhhale Rai was already lost in the darkness.

Negotiations for my third marriage had already started. I was no longer young, but marriages were fashionable even among the very elderly men. One of course no longer looked for a comparable family to marry in, nor insisted on one's preference. Marriage was all that mattered. Chhoti Chachi now devoted almost all her time to gods and goddesses, pūjā and ritual fasting. Every day of the week was either a fasting day, or a festival day, or a ceremonious e· l to some religious observance. She probably had two square meals only once or twice a week. It looked as if she had decided not to risk her next life by losing merit in this. After all who was there for whom she should risk it? She thought of life as yarn spun on a

spinning wheel and wondered : someone owns the wheel, another one has contributed the cotton, and someone else is doing the spinning, so how can I claim the yarn?

As for me, I had gone through two marriages. A third wasn't going to make any difference. The ties of heart had half-formed twice and snapped twice. Who knew what was going to be the fate the third time? I had sought Kishen Babu's advice on the matter. He was now all skin and bones— his body a dried-up twig like a hathyogi's. His son had now started earning some sort of a living, and his wife stayed with the son. If sometimes economic pressures mounted at home, Kishen Babu would also take up some work. But for the rest, he had adopted the life-style of a wandering monk. His addiction to a pinch of opium continued. Everyday at the stroke of four in the evening, he needed his pinch and he was out hunting for it. Sometimes it so happened that he couldn't raise the necessary resources, and then he resorted to nature's own opium. Many of his friends tried to warn him off this deadly habit : 'You'll pay for it with you life one day,' they told him.

To this his standard answer was :

'So what? Life is not going to stay with me forever anyway. He who gave it to me must take it away one day. And he too needs an excuse for taking it away. On the other side, how long can I keep something that doesn't belong to me? This relationship must come to an end one day. It's a matter of supreme indifference who snaps this thread first— He or me. All relationships must go the same way— my wife is no longer a wife; she's a mother. All wives must become mothers one day. My son has become a father. His first concern is to look after my needs. He must get whatever I need. In that sense, in fact, I was never a father, though I was his father.'

The things he said made me laugh, but the laughter never rose to my lips. Somehow, it died before it could rise that high.

It was Rahmatullah's illness that had brought Kishen Babu to town. He was staying with him too. Rahmatullah had fallen victim to a mysterious wasting disease. His appetite had vanished. His body

had shrivelled up. Bade Rai had him examined by the best doctor in town, who diagnosed him to be suffering from a blood- thinning disease. Since no one quite grasped what this meant, he explained further. Rahmatullah's blood had lost the capacity to fight the invading germs. His face had become deathly pale. He would occasionally be helped to his shop, where he would lay himself down. Whatever custom he received, he took it home where his wife attended to it. Bade Rai had realized that Rahmatullah was on his last legs. More than once he proposed some sort of permanent settlement for him and his wife, but Rahmatullah refused. He always said the same thing : 'Don't you worry, master. I'll soon be my old self. You just wait and see if I don't bring racing horses to a dead halt with a single tug again!' That was an art he alone knew. With one hand and a rope he brought running horses to a sudden stop. It was amazing. The horse couldn't move a step after that. People wanted to know how he did it, but in reply they only got a laugh and occasionally a remark that it was a family secret and was passed on only from father to son. Only his son would receive it from him. But that hope was now gone. How could he think of having a son in his present condition?

When Kishen Babu set eyes on Rahmatullah, he too reached the same conclusion : his days were numbered. So he spent almost all his time with him. Though poor, Rahmatullah kept his house clean. He regaled Kishen Babu with stories of Jagan Acharya; the way Jagan Babu would enter the house, the way he would sit down and work, books upon books that he read, the amount of writing he did, so on and so on. Rahmatullah said he would have no regrets even if he were to die now, having been host to such a great man as Jagan Acharya. A messenger of Gandhi had stayed with a keeper of horses! And more— a living God like Kishen Babu had been his guest! And Bhaskar Rai! What more could he wish for? If he had any worry, it was only this woman. And that there was no one to whom he could leave the family secret.

Before he died, Rahmatullah revealed the secret to me. The horse has a nerve which is his weak spot. A little pressure applied to this nerve immobilizes the horse. The rope has to catch the

horse on that spot, and the horse falls down paralysed.

As Rahmatullah got worse, Kishen Babu's visits to the haveli ceased. He now constantly sat by his bedside. Rahmatullah complained of bodyache. His veins were cracking, he said. Kishen Babu sat rubbing his body all over despite Mansa alias Sitabo's protests. Don't you worry on my account, Kishen Babu told her, I can't sit idle all day while you're working. And, of course, all that stitching at night. One can't be sitting idle twenty-four hours, nor can one be working twenty-four hours. She didn't know what to say.

I was visiting Rahmatullah to consult him about my marriage. Entirely on my own, without a whisper to anyone. Rahmatullah seemed to be in a daze. Conscious a few minutes and comatose next. I unburdened myself to Kishen Babu. He listened attentively, then said : 'Hard for me to advise you, Bhaskar Babu. You know best what your needs are.'

'My own needs matter little,' I said. 'What matters is to keep the place going. Bade Rai never says anything himself, but Chhote Rai is forever bringing his messages : We're all like ripe fruit. Ready to fall down any moment. Rani too should be getting married soon. Chachi is lost in her otherworldly pursuits. Who's going to look after the kids? Sona and Raghubar must have someone to take care of them, mustn't they?'

'Everyone has his needs, including you,' said Kishen Babu. 'It's a different question how you meet them. You know how I used to meet mine in those days. Now it's a pinch of opium. Failing that, the jungleful of snake-pits. Everyone must find satisfaction, one place or another, one way or another.'

In his drowsy, half-awake state of stupor, Rahmatullah was registering every word. He offered his opinion :

'You are the scion of the family, the living flame. It must be kept burning. The two little kids— may God grant them a long life— must be looked after. Ever since Badi Mālkin died, the cracks on the haveli walls have been getting wider. How much can Bade Rai do to paper them over single-handed? You must keep the flame burning, and use it to light another. . . It has to be you'

Kishen Babu thought a little and rejoined :

'Yes, you must get married. Though there's nothing like freedom, conditions do not permit you to be free. Not that freedom is a cure-all. In fact, when responsibilities are foremost, even the unfree are free. You have responsibilities : you must bring the kids up; you must look after the elders; you must manage the zamindari. You must have someone to share these responsibilities with. Whatever else a wife may or may not do, she does make it easier to shoulder the burden. Should you begin to falter, she lends a hand. Take me, for instance. I returned home tired and broken. There my wife almost persuaded me to believe that I had lost nothing, that everything was intact. I began to feel as if I owned boundless wealth— the wealth of faith. Maybe it was an illusion. But, apart from being beautiful, illusions have this capacity to unfold to you your true interests, interests which you have constantly allowed to go unnoticed.'

Kishen Babu had gone against the grain of his thought to counsel me the way he did. He had always believed that one must take one's own decisions. But apparently there was in him an inner spring which kept has world fresh and blooming and the channels of compassion running full, his dry exterior notwithstanding.

Then Rahmatullah, in his failing voice, called out to his wife : 'Come and offer sweets to the youngest Rai. He's our new master. I want to see him a family man again. . . before I die.' And he added : 'Tell the halwai to send his boy with the sweets. You must not touch them.'

Kishen Babu looked at me. I quickly said 'What's this, Rahmatullah? Are you and bahu untouchables for me?' Even if senior in age, the wife of a subject was always addressed as bahu in our family.

Kishen Babu seemed to like my response. He gave a happy smile and, casting a sly glance at me, said :

'Bhaskar, remember that in the times to come, won't you?'

My third marriage took place in the summer. Raghubar had an

attack of conjunctivitis. He had to stay at home with Bhavani and Rani, but he was inconsolable and constantly demanded that he be taken to me. I was going through the wedding rituals and could not have left the place but I kept in touch with home-messengers. Since the place of wedding wasn't too far away, I brushed aside all conventions and returned home at night after the rituals were over. Raghubar's eyes were swollen. Sona was bewildered. She didn't quite grasp what was happening, yet had sensed that something was afoot. A new mother was on her way. But what was a new mother? Since she still remembered her own mother, this one had to be a different person. Different, yes, but like who? This she was unable to visualise.

It's now forty years since that marriage. Or possibly forty-five. Yes, forty-five. The question sometimes haunts me : Was I right to marry again? I had married a very young girl–Saranga. She may have been eighteen. From an ordinary home. This question troubled me every time her tender spirit rose in revolt, though the revolt always subsided quickly. These were mostly occasions when Raghubar and Sona demanded my attention, and I had to yield to their persistent urgings, in the process often neglecting Saranga. Sona called her Bhabhi, after Rani and Arun, but Bhavani had trained Raghubar to call her Amma. He probably thought the word raised motherly feelings in a woman's heart. Why, even a strange woman may find herself unable to resist it! But generally both the kids mostly stuck to Rani, and Saranga did not like this. There was already talk of Rani's marriage. When she got married, the 'new mother' would be the only reason, if any, for the two kids to call it their home. Raghubar was slightly better off in one respect: Bade Rai often had him brought to him and Chhote Rai sang him songs :

Amid the groves of Brij
Shall we go and live
Kanhaiya! Kanhaiya!
Shall we sing,
And a temple of love to him
Shall we build!

And there, in our hearts,
Shall we have him live!

and told him stories of Gopal Bhaiya : how he had helped the widow's son; how at the wedding of Masterji's daughter, the milk from his little *lutiyā* had filled cauldrons and would still not stop flowing. And he told him stories from the Mahābhārata. The result of it all was that Raghubar was always looking for a chance to escape from the zenana quarters. He even wanted his food to be served to him in the male quarters. That always left Sona to fend for herself.

Chhoti Chachi now kept to herself, apart from seeing to it that the household machinery ran smoothly. Sometimes, if it became absolutely necessary, she would call the new bahu and entrust her with some duties, which she performed very willingly. In fact, she always felt gratified when entrusted with work. Because of this, everyone was generally very happy with her. Sona, however, remembered her mother and couldn't stop comparing the two. In fact, she often spoke about Kala to her brother making sure first that the 'new mother' was busy elsewhere and was not listening. How sweetly she sang! How she sang lullabies to her even as her hands worked deftly on the dress she was making for her! How she loved them! Raghubar would listen to Sona with rapt attention. He had no clear conception of a mother, so he tried to form an image from the 'stories' that Sona told him. And he wondered why he was not with his mother now, why his mother had ceased to be, and whether, had she been there, she would be like the new mother, or different from her.

Then Sona would say :

'She was suckling you when she died.'

'When shall we go to her?'

'When we die.'

'What does it mean to die?'

She explained as if she had solved the riddle of life and death. With her head bent she would say :

'They come and they take you away and they burn you. That's all!'

'Will they burn us too when we die?'
'Of course.'
'Then I won't go to mother. It'll be so hot there!'
'I'll tell you what. You kill me, then I can go to mother.'
'I'il tell Papa you say bad things.'
'Is it bad to talk about going to mother?'
'You have another mother. Why don't you stay with her?'

'She may be mother to you, she is bhabhi to me. Bhabhi sleeps in mother's bed now.' She looked about her watchfully, then said : 'Bad, bad woman!'

One day, the new mother overheard this kind of talk, and her first reaction was to play dumb when I came home that evening. All my queries were received with a grunt. When, losing patience, I was a bit short with her, she came out with it.

'I can't stay here any longer,' she said.
'Then where would you stay?'
'Send me to my parents.'
'Whatever for?'
'These two kids. . . they don't like me. You married me for their sake, didn't you? My parents are poor but not so poor that . . .' and she burst out crying.
'Will you tell me what happened?'
'Ask Sona. She thinks I've taken her mother's place. And she tells that little child, Raghubar, all this, turning him against me too. Bhabhi sleeps in mother's bed, she says.'

She had dressed herself dazzlingly, and I was dazzled. I sent for Sona at once. When she came, I first gave her a slap, then asked her :

'What were you saying about your new mother?'

Raghubar too had arrived. When he saw Sona receiving a slap, he cowered a little and, withdrawing slowly, went and stood behind the door. I pulled him up too.

That was the greatest mistake I made. Sona developed a permanent grudge against the new mother, and could never grant her the place vacated by her mother. Raghubar too was affected in the same way, but he didn't let it show. He only made his visits

to the family quarters rarer. But Sona had no choice : she had to stay in the family quarters and put up with the new mother. She was like the goat who is tied to a tree next to a tiger. She has all the food she wants, but the tiger is constantly watching her. So she hovered around chachi most of the time for safety.

The slap stunned her.

'Will you ever say such things again for your mother?'

She kept quiet. I twisted her ear and she burst out crying. The limits of her tolerance had been breached.

Rani came running. Her eyes fell on the scene and she stopped at the door, debating for a moment whether it would be proper for her to intervene. But she had brought them up! Both of them! She couldn't, of course, say anything, but she swooped like an eagle, caught them by their hands, and dragged both of them away. She then dashed into Chhoti Chachi's room and cried her heart out : 'Who'll look after these two, Chachi? What's going to happen to them ? Bade Bhaiya had never ever touched them before, but now...' She was convulsed and her eyes streamed like an aged neem tree : non-stop.

Chachi swept both of them into her arms, though she had to have a bath later. She just couldn't hold herself. Rani never again let Raghubar and Sona out of her sight till the day of her marriage. When she was married, she made every effort to take Sona with her, and it was with great difficulty that Chachi could talk her out of it. 'Try to understand, Sona. No one wants to shoulder another man's burden. The first few days, it'll be all hunky-dory, but later she'll get the same treatment there that she's getting here on her new mother's account.'

There was nothing she could say after this.

Rani was married into a big and distinguished family. They too had a big zamindari. The marriage party consisted of two hundred wagons. They had demanded that the bullocks be fed ghee, gram, mustard oilcakes and straw. There was a separate requisition for horses. There was none for the bullock drivers, though. Bade Rai had ordered the same reception for them as for the *barātīs.* but

they never dared to have their meals till instructed explicitly by their masters, or till the masters had retired. They were anyway trained to put up with hunger. Rani's father-in- law had a famed temper. The bridegroom was his son from the first wife. The elder brother of the zamindar sahib was popularly known as Kamsa. A gujjar had neatly beheaded him one day after closing up on him from behind while he was riding into his zamindari. His family had made sure that no one ever got to know of this since that would have meant a loss of faith in the invulnerability of the zamindar and a consequent loss of fear. A quiet cremation was followed by a severe round of repression, which is still impressed in the memory of the people. Zamindars and horses of those days were alike known for their tempers and their testiness.

Bade Rai knew their tempers well. Hence he spared no expense and saw to it that everything that could be done to please the barātīs was done. He spent a hundred and fifty thousand rupees in those days. The normal expenses of the haveli had already made sure that we were up to our neck in debt. Borrowing and repaying were among my responsibilities, though of course everything was done in the name of Bade Rai. Though dowry-seeking was considered dishonourable, the bride's family prided itself on giving the maximum dowry it could, and was often wiped out in the process. It is still wiped out, though now it is the dowry- seekers who make sure of it. I didn't find it easy to raise such a big amount. Property and land wasn't fetching any worthwhile price. In the first place, there were hardly and property buyers around. Then there was the Congress to reckon with. Nobody was quite certain what would happen to private property once the British were gone and the Congress was in power. People thought all class divisions would disappear and everybody would be treated as equal. That was Gandhi's contribution. No one made Gandhi what he was : he had made himself. No one of course makes himself into a Gandhi any more : they make themselves into ministers and money-grabbers. Ownership of property was already becoming more and more like ownership of a tailoring business. The size of garment you get depends on how you cut and stitch the cloth; similarly the credit-size

of the zamindars also depended on how one managed one's zamindari. The war had created its own problems. We were now living on our past credit. People, I suspect, had a shrewd idea that Bade Rai was now in reduced circumstances, but a popular belief that the gold and silver of the ancient Rais were stashed away in the treasury persisted. That made loans possible, and, of course, we did keep repaying off and on. So we did have some standing in the eyes of the people. Actually it is only in such cases that standing mostly comes in handy.

The wedding day was approaching. We were still very much short of the required amount. So much so that Bade Rai himself had begun to worry about it. Then one day he got up very early in the morning and walked out of the house all by himself. That was unheard of : in the first place, Bade Rai rarely walked; and alone? Later, as usual, people woke up and went to seek his blessings. They found that the cane and the shoes were missing. The bed as well as the room was unoccupied. He hadn't even shaved. The hookāh had not been freshened. Chhote Rai, during his long association with Bade Rai, couldn't recall a single occasion when Bade Rai had left home without shaving.

The whole house was in a state of shock. Where could Bade Rai possibly have gone? The saddest of all was Rani. She was tortured by the thought that she might be the cause of Bade Rai's disappearance. She cried so much that everyone else started worrying about her forgetting their own worry. The secret search for Bade Rai continued right into the afternoon. All the possible places to which he could have gone were looked up. He walked back in the afternoon bathed in dust. He went straight to his room, shut the door, changed and re-emerged after a short while. Everyone stood around and gaped at the closed doors. No one could muster enough courage to step forward and ask. In the end, it was Rani who stepped out of the zenana and asked : 'Where were you, Babu?' And she burst out crying again.

Bade Rai was moved and couldn't speak. It took him some time to recover and say :

'I heard last night that a saint was visiting the town. I was

told that you had to go to him on foot, without anyone knowing it, to secure the full benefit of his blessings. I had never been to a saint before, so I thought I might try this time. If you choose to call on someone, you have to play by the rules he chooses to lay down.'

'I might also have joined you. . .' offered Chhote Rai.

Bade Rai laughed : 'You are a saint yourself. Like a lotus in a pond, quite untouched by its waters.'

He busied himself with washing and bathing, but our worry had been replaced with curiosity.

The mystery of Bade Rai's disappearance took a long time to be solved. Another mystery that remained unresolved was the appearance of money which had been eluding us only till the day before. The town had only one bank— the Imperial Bank. Bade Rai would write a cheque and, presto! there was money. The splendour of the marriage left the whole town gaping. There was one incident that Bade Rai never forgot. He had a horse called George, purchased from a British Commissioner. When the Commissioner decided to return to England, he looked for someone who would appreciate the true worth of his horse and give it the same love and care he had bestowed on it. In the entire district, there was only one connoisseur of horses— and that was Bade Rai. So he called Bade Rai and said :

'I want to give you this horse. I don't want my George to feel that I left him with someone who lacks appreciation of his real worth.'

Bade Rai took one look at the horse and immediately fell in love with it. Safed was dead and he wanted a horse he really liked. The Commissioner told him that the price was immaterial— the important thing was the horse should remain in good hands. 'I have brought him up like my own son,' he said.

When the horse had been acquired there arose the question of its name. George the Fifth was the ruling British Emperor at the time. His friends told Bade Rai that calling the horse after the Emperor could invite trouble : if the government didn't like it, there

would be hell to pay! But in the purchase deed the Commissioner had called it George, and had stipulated the condition that the name would not be changed. Still, Bade Rai did have a go at the name change, but it didn't work out. George simply would not accept it. So Bade Rai ate the humble pie and carried on with the old name. At the sound 'George' from Bade Rai, he would start prancing around. If in coach harness, he would know from the inflection of his name whether he was being asked to speed up or slow down; one didn't have to use the reins.

Some of his friends dared the bridegroom to get George from Bade Rai. They told him that he had only to ask for it and refuse to play *Kanganā* till Bade Rai agreed. So when the time came for this particular ritual, the bridegroom refused to play *Kanganā* or eat *Bāsrā*. Bade Rai himself pleaded with him : 'Kunwar Sahib, take my whole stable away if you want to, but please spare George. I hold him in trust for someone.' But the bridegroom did not relent. When the bridegroom's father got to know of this, he simply said: 'What respect can one expect from a person who values his horse above his son-in-law? Let's go back. Forget about the wedding.'

When Bade Rai heard this, he was too stunned to speak. When he regained his voice, he said :

'Hari Rai still has it in him to stop the betrayer of his daughter dead in his tracks— but he won't do it.' Then he called out to Kale :

'Get George, Kale. And hand his reins to the bridegroom's father.' And he told Dīwānjī to arrange for a golden caparisoning for the horse. 'Lest they say we sent horse-flesh. And if you can't arrange it, send five thousand rupees with the horse.'

Kale came and stood before him, hands folded and eyes moist. He was finding it difficult to speak. Bade Rai patted him on the shoulder and said :

'Why do you worry? After all, he is going with Rani. If my daughter's happiness depends on him, so be it! Let him go with her.' Then he instructed him : 'Get him ready and bring him here first.'

When George came, he said : 'George, I'm sending you to keep my daughter company.' That was all he said. Then he came back to his room and wrote a letter to the groom's father :

Dear friend,

I am pledging my daughter in your service. Kunwarji expressed a wish for George. I hold George in trust for a friend. I hope he will now be able to enjoy your patronage. I am giving my daughter away to you; it is silly of me to want to hold back George. Being speechless, however, these animals evoke grater sympathy in us.

I have only one request to make of you, and I make it with folded hands. If ever you feel that George is no longer deserving of yoúr patronage, please send word to me. I'll have him brought back and replaced, if you so wished, by another horse I can afford. Or I will present myself before you with whatever compensation you would consider appropriate.

Your servant
Hari Rai

When Bade Rai came out to bid goodbye to Rani, she clung to him, crying 'Baba', 'Baba.' He patted her softly on the back and consoled her. 'No, no, dear, you mustn't cry. Now you won't be homesick. George is going with you.' She stared blankly at him. She didn't know that George was to go with her. All that she could mutter was : 'What have you done, Baba!' And then it was as if she had been struck dumb. She bid us farewell clinging tightly to us, but not once did she utter a word.

So it turned out that while Sona didn't go with her, George did.

Everyone in the house was prepared for Rani's farewell. Everyone knows that the daughter of the house has to leave one day. Never can she belong fully to her parents' house. That house is like the flowerbed where she blooms like a flower, but what is

finally left behind is only the fragrance. But when George left, the house was never the same again. Certainly not Bade Rai. He of course, never talked about it, but he often had visions of George: George standing next to him, George standing in the corner, now over the other side. George is fixing him with his stare. George rearing up and assuming the shape of a question mark. Bade Rai woke up in the middle of the night, and saw George with his head in the window staring fixedly at him. In fact, nights he always had this vision of two eyes glinting at him form different directions. Sometimes, like a horse with a 'tear-slope' pattern of hair on face, tears tore from his eyes and rolled down his face. Although George had in fact no hair patterns at all. Sometimes, Bade Rai saw him standing at the door, rubbing his back against it as though he hadn't been brushed for months, or denied permission to roll on the ground. That's the only way a horse really freshens himself— by taking a carefree tumble on the ground.

He would sit up and try to reason with himself : George was not yours; he wasn't born or bred in you stable. He came full grown from another's stable. Actually, you forced yourself on him. But he couldn't think beyond this point. The feeling of an association running over several past lives overcame him— an association that was marked by frequent meetings and equally frequent partings. Only Kale understood his feeling, or Rahmatullah. Rahmatullah, however, had been confined to the sickbed for months now. Whenever Bade Rai thought of George, he couldn't help thinking of Rahmatullah.

Once Bade Rai despatched a messenger to find out how Rani and George were getting on. He reported that George had refused to touch food or drink for several days after their arrival. When Rani found out about it, she went to her mother-in-law and requested to be taken to George, or for George to be brought to her, so that she could persuade him to eat. But at first no one was prepared to listen to her. The thought of the bahu going to the stables couldn't even be entertained, but when Rani herself went off food for several days, her husband went and brought George to the doorstep. The very sight of him was enough to upset

her : She felt as if Baba himself stood before her. His head drooped like that of a man debilitated by a long illness, but the moment she touched him he drew himself to his full height and stood erect, as if the touch had worked a miracle. It was no miracle, though; only a gentle touch of someone who loved him. She talked to him as she talked to Arun when he was mad at someone and took it out on food : 'George Bhaiya, why don't you eat? Have you gone crazy? You know if you don't eat I won't eat either. And then I'll die of hunger. Come on, now, eat!' And George ate. He ate everything she gave him. He wasn't George now; he was Arun.

Bade Rai listened with his eyes closed. As he listened, a thin line shone through the lids. Then the line grew thicker and thicker.

Chhote Rai got the ceremony for Arun's adoption gone through around the same time as Rani's marriage. The ceremony took place in the same compound where Majhhale Rai had his living quarters. After several years of litigation, he had to leave the kothi. He was granted a third share of the value of the kothi to be paid to him in instalments. Bade Rai permitted him to stay on in the rear part of the building till such time as his own kothi got ready. He was getting it built in the temple compound. The adoption ceremony took place in the front portion of the Gahara Baag kothi. There was a dinner party and a *mujrā*. Bade Rai was not in favour of *mujrās*, but Kishen Babu had nevertheless set up one. The performer was a famed artiste : Hamida Bai. She treated Kishen Babu as her teacher and touched his feet, though actually he was nothing of the sort. The only reason she respected him was that in the days of his glory, no matter how drunk he was, how unruly and riotous, Kishen Babu had always treated her with the same respect with which he treated her when he was sober. In her entire career as a courtesan, Hamida Bai had never come across another person like him.'

Chhote Rai splurged on the ceremony. Bade Rai wanted the expenses to be met from the fund raised for the purposes of Rani's wedding, but Chhote Rai dissented. 'She has some money of her own and she wants these expenses met from it. I'm of course

down-at-heel,' he said. This had set people wondering : Her own money? Where did she get the money from? The fact was that Chhoti Chachi's father had been in the habit of making deposits in the names of each of her daughters at every harvest. This was known only to Chhoti Chachi and Chhote Rai. Chhote Rai, of course, also received some income from the zamindari, but he used it to meet his own expenses. Chachi never questioned him on where and how he spent the money, nor did he ever query her on her money.

Majhhale Rai attended the ceremony, though he was a bit put out. At some point, Majhhali Chachi had blurted out something that Chhoti Chachi had taken to heart. 'My husband had always been sure,' she had said, 'that Chhote Rai would eventually adopt Arun. but I thought differently. What use adopting a child who's already well-provided for? What good is bringing more water to a pond already overflowing? Adopt, if you must, a child who has no one to call his own except you. Then, and only then, does it make a difference. After all, who doesn't know that only the real one is the true one; the adopted one always stays a pretender.' Chachi was offended. Chhote Rai made a lot of effort to counter the effect : 'A Child,' he said, 'is a child. Give him to an animal to love, and the animal makes him his own. We're at least human. And we have loved him since day one. Then who knows how a child will turn out, whether he's yours or someone else's?' But the seed had been planted in Chachi's mind. A right remark, made at the right time, can work wonders; not to speak of a mind, it can plant seeds in thin air. It is irrelevant whether the remark had any truth in it or no. Chachi often began to wonder whether they were allowing themselves to be used. But since Arun had been very dear to her, the seed didn't germinate. His innocence and her love made sure that it disintegrated and dissolved as the days passed.

My latest wife was getting along fine except that when it came to the kids our expectations from her ran counter to the nature of an ordinary mortal. This I suppose was also how tradition had it. Kaikeyī is considered a villainess precisely because she prized the interest of her son above that of others. Our tradition has

weighed wholly against the possibility of an alternative interpretation, though, of course, claims and counterclaims were always made. It was Bade Rai's constant effort that he should get minute-to-minute reports on both the kids. In fact, Raghubar spent most of his time with him. As days passed, he even moved his sleeping quarters to Bade Rai's room. A little trouble with Sona, and the entire haveli resounded with Bade Rai's mighty roar. That sometimes annoyed Saranga so much that she lost restraint. 'Bade Rai thinks I'm going to poison his grandson and starve his grand-daughter. If he had his way he'd transfer even Sona to his room. The wretch happens to be a girl so must stay in the zenana! May God give him the powers to change a girl into a boy!'

I argued with her. 'Look,' I said, 'one loose word can start a fire. I know you're good at heart and don't mean ill, but who's going to look into your heart? While everyone hears the words you speak. Do you mean Bade Rai wants to transform Sona into a boy and to keep her with him? Who suggested such an absurdity to you? Give some quarter to reason; don't get carried away by your emotions. Those are quicksands you are stepping into; one false step and you are stuck for good.'

'Call it reason or call it emotion. Call it what you will. But that's the fact. That's what I see with my own eyes. You want me to shut my eyes to it? A stepmother will remain a stepmother—make her out of mud or make her out of gold. Your dear darling daughter goes round saying her mother is dead, her mother is dead. So she's dead! Will her shouting from the housetops like a *mullah* bring her back to life? Hiding herself in Chachi's quarters all day!'

I'd warned Sona more than once, but I also realized that for a child who has seen her mother die before her own eyes it was an experience difficult to forget. Was it at all possible that the person who took her mother's place would not feel slighted? But, on the other hand, could one muzzle her thinking by muzzling her mouth? It was proving difficult for me to make my way through these tricky questions. On the one hand, it was clearly impossible for the child to accept that Saranga was her living mother; on the other, it was also equally true that every time Sona made a

declaration of her mother's death it inflicted a fresh wound on Saranga's psyche. The wound festered, putresced, and its fetid smell attacked everyone around her. Including, sometimes, Raghubar. As if he was just another projectile that had been burled at her to cause her injury.

Fed up with her constant nagging about Raghubar's new sleeping arrangement, I had to issue a stern admonition to Raghubar one day within clear earshot of Bade Rai : 'You will sleep inside from now on. You bother grandpa.'

Bade Rai took the hint. He was about to speak but thought better of it. Perhaps he would have said : 'No, no, he doesn't.' But he just turned his face away. I overlooked his reaction and took Raghubar to the inner quarters forcibly. That was enough to please her, but Raghubar cried all night. Saranga was asleep soon; I kept getting up every few minutes to look at Raghubar, and in the light of the dimmed lamp I saw him tossing and turning every time. I felt the urge to lift him up and to bring him to my bed, but I didn't. I don't know why. I looked at Saranga, and went back to my bed. How I now wish I had followed my impulse. Who could've objected to my son sleeping with me? So what even if one did? Wasn't it strange that Raghubar felt uncomfortable and out of place in a part of the house where children of his age should feel most intimately at home? Perhaps it is people who make places. I was of course still there, but who knows, maybe I didn't quite feel the same to him. Had Kala been there, he would have been snuggling against her, and wouldn't probably be looking at me that way. You could scent each one of us in each one of us. But the equation of scents had altered. The air itself was different; the vibrations had changed. You know there are vibrations which tell you when someone is a part of you; and there are vibrations which tell you when he is not. Between the two there's a glass curtain that clearly separates the two, a gossamer-thin glass curtain which the slightest increase in pressure on either side will crack. And it had cracked. The negative vibrations had swamped the positive ones. I too was swamped; well, maybe not exactly swamped, but certainly badly splattered.

When Rupa died it was Rupa alone who died. Everyone else continued as before. No difference at all except that for no rhyme or reason I found myself in the category of widowers. Sure, there was a feeling of a vaccuum for some time, but it was dissolved into nothingness very soon. It was different when Kala died. She left behind a wounded ambience. A half-dead ambience. Relationships cracked, like salt crystals. New relationships too came under pressure. I realized at Kala's death that man doesn't die alone : many things die with him. Maybe, 'things' isn't quite the right word; let's say there is much that dies. The ambience is the greatest victim. A feeling of insecurity ravages the soul. Perceptions find new dimensions. When my father, Bade Rai, died, all the Rais who had lived before him or who were living then, died with him. A couple of them may have been physically alive then. But how much life is there in one who is alive only in the body? For that matter, I'm still living, the last of the Rais. As Rais go, I may be of little consequence, but when I die all the Rais will die with me once again. No Rai will live after me. A tradition which had its ups and downs will go down forever. Like a tree which has shed all its leaves. If new leaves appear, the tree flourishes again, but if the tree has shed its leaves finally, it is no longer a tree. It's always better, anyway, to begin anew. Kala's death too might not have had any significance but for the fact she was a mother. For centuries, a space has been forming around the mother— a space, which has now become impenetrable, even for the father. She doesn't owe this space to any special powers that she might have, but only to her loving and sacrificing nature, her capacity for self-denial, and her indomitable courage when it comes to the safety and security of her offspring. Her body may give way, but the mother in her doesn't. Whenever it appears that it might, there's a renascence of her true nature— of her sacrificing and self-denying nature- – and she's back to being a mother as before. A mother may go away, but she plants herself in someone, somewhere, in some form or the other. When our mother died, Arun was very small. She planted herself in Rani. Those whom mother had loved transformed themselves into her image and brought up Arun. Where

was the father then? May have been somewhere!

I got up several times that night. Till Raghubar finally went to sleep I kept asking myself if I was the one responsible for that feeling of alienation in him. Sona slept in the room next to Chachi's. The room gave her a strange feeling of being watched intently by a dog sitting on its haunches all night, though Chhote Rai and Chhoti Chachi did occasionally look in on her.

At times she resented it : why did she alone have to sleep alone?

In the morning Saranga was quite unaware of all that had transpired during the night. For me and Raghubar, the night had been like a long battle. When we got up, Raghubar was missing from his bed. Every morning, Bhavani came inside to unlock the kitchen. There were no taps then. Every morning, water-bearers carried bucketfuls of water from the well and filled the large vessels kept in the kitchen. Though the kitchen was some distance away from the rooms, the mornings of the house reverberated to the sounds of the vessels being scrubbed and washed followed by the crashing sound of water being emptied from the buckets into the ponderous vessels. It's possible that it was these noises that woke up Raghubar, or maybe he hadn't been able to sleep till then. He must have got up and come out of the zenana quarters with Bhavani.

Though Raghubar was to sleep inside, Bade Rai nevertheless had had his bed laid out. He must have thought that, unable to sleep, Raghubar may turn difficult and insist on returning to him in the middle of the night. And if he did come back and didn't find the bed laid out, he might feel abandoned by his grandpa too. So when he turned over and saw Raghubar sleeping peacefully in his bed, a smile of self-satisfaction stole into his face— a smile of smug self-satisfaction. Of course, a thin smile like this was easily lost in the thick, bushy growth on his upper lip, but a joyous expression slowly spread over his entire face like splashed water and gave him away. He extended a hand from his bed and placed it on his forehead, forming a sort of bridge between the two beds.

Bade Rai asked Bhavani later : 'When did he come?'

Bhavani informed him that when he went into the kitchen to take out the cans for milking the cattle and to get the water

vessels refilled, he saw Raghubar Bhaiya cowering outside Chhoti Mālkin's room. Seeing him, he pleaded with him to take him to Baba. 'What could I do, master?' he said. Bade Rai only gave a 'H'm' of acknowledgement

To come out of the zenana quarters, one had to negotiate three staircases, an extended open space and a doorway. Though they were all lighted throughout the night, there were dark corners. Raghubar was terrified of spirits hiding in them, who were sure to extend an elongated hand in order to pull him in. Had he not been so terrified, he would simply have run all the way from the zenana. Another difficulty was that the doors to the zenana quarters were pushed shut at night and it was beyond a small child to dislodge the heavy rod that bolted them.

Bade Rai watched him sleep, at peace with himself and unconscious to the world. The past of the Rai family was watching its future.

I decided not to refer to it. Saranga sarcastically remarked that had he thought of her as his mother, would he have slipped away so stealthily? The same thought had occurred to me in a different way : Had she been Kala, would he have left her? Would he have cried all night? Would she have slept through it all? Saranga kept up the barrage : 'His heart is elsewhere, and all because of Bade Rai.' I had been listening to her quietly so far, but at the last sentence I had to caution her :

'Look here, Saranga. This family goes back a long way, and so do its values and customs. We have to respect them.'

That day I discovered for the first time that she kept a sharp tongue between her teeth. She retorted at once :

'But I don't go back a long way, now could I even if I wanted to. The old values of this family will crumble like sandy plaster if what goes back a long way doesn't come to terms with what's new. If I care for your happiness, for the happiness of your children and your family, then I also have a right to expect that my happiness will be of concern to everyone in the house. If that doesn't happen, I won't be able to help feeling that I have been brought here as a bondmaid. I am a daughter-in-law of this house, not its bondmaid.

The two are very different things. There is a certain part of this haveli that's my territory, where I live and where I must be given full rights. I must be trusted— by children and by adults alike. If everyone believes that I won't ever set fire to this house, one m ' also believe that I won't ever give poison to the children of th family.'

I felt this family had witnessed a battle of Plassey first when Majhhale Rai had made his declaration of independence by marrying the new Majhhali Chachi. It saw a second Plassey when he pulled apart the entire fabric of values that the Rai family had laboriously woven over a period of centuries by adopting an orphan. We were now on the threshold of a third Plassey. A call for independence had gone out— and when this call goes out, so sharp and so loud it is, it does not need to be accompanied by bows and arrows, or guns and canons. On the contrary, it is the authority that needs to resort to ammunition to protect itself.

I was shaken to the core of my being. No, I said to myself, this won't ever happen. And I must tell you— not once did Saranga's voice waver when she made that speech. And the Rai house survived it. It eventually broke up when Arun returned an engineer and Chhote Rai deserted the sinking ship and went and stood with Arun on the shore. Like its Captain, Bade Rai went down with the ship when it finally sank into the mighty ocean of time. There were many who had gauged the direction and the power of the waves and had steered their ships to the coast and, using the lifeboat of politics, had saved themselves from disaster at ocean, but Bade Rai was not one of them. In a way, he was right. Dry and sapless leaves may fly a certain distance with the power of the wind, but they can't get very far. The crushing grip of Time has to reach them sometime, and it does.

As I mentioned before, Majhhale Rai filed a suit against Mirchi And his whole family under Section 307, although he had given a promise to Mirchi's daughter that he would not take any action against them. The only concession he made to her was to lift the entire rescue episode clean out of his story. The charge against

Mirchi, his wife and his sons was that they had gone to fetch the scraper to skin him alive and their intention was to kill him. A passing woman had taken pity on him and had released him. Neither the report nor the statement made any mention of who the woman was, where she suddenly appeared from, and why she released him. The report also mentioned that apart from the fact that they wanted to kill him, they had also committed a profanity. The pissing-in-the-mouth episode had also been lifted clean out. During the court proceedings he was repeatedly asked what profanity had been committed, to which his answer was that the thing was too shameful to be mentioned in the court. The defence counsel during his cross-examination had asked him if the profanity committed bore any resemblance to what had happened with Mirchi when in Majhhale Rai's presence someone had pissed into his mouth, Majhhale Rai had expressed his inability to answer that question.

When trying to establish the allegations brought against Mirchi, his wife and his sons, Majhhale Rai was repeatedly asked by the defence counsel to identify the woman who had helped him escape. Majhhale Rai kept repeating that he didn't know her. Mirchi's daughter, sitting in the courtroom, shouted : 'No, of course, you don't know her. Why would you? She forgave you because you cried for your child, but you don't know her. For shame, Rai! Have you no honour? Your made a promise! Is that flesh or horseshit you have between you teeth? I let go then the man who disgraced my father, but you won't get a drop of water from me if you were dying of thirst again.'

The court silenced her : 'Anything you want to say, come to the dock and say it.' 'As if anything spoken from here must be false and anything spoken from there the God's truth!' Make me stand where you will, the truth will remain the truth,' she muttered. Mirchi shut her up. When it was his turn in the dock, Mirchi put up quite a show :

'Huzūr,' he said, 'Majhhale Rai is our master. We have eaten the salt of the Rais, and it flows as blood in our veins. He may beat us and torture us, but he also gives us shade. He had a bhangi piss into my mouth, but I give it no thought. A master is a master,

a subject is a subject. It's my own fellow man's piss, anyway, not an enemy's.'

It was too much for Majhhale Rai to take.

'This man— my subject? The man who desecrated me, the man who thirsts for my blood!'

Mirchi was now whining before him with folded hands :

'Don't say such words, master. We're your children; we may go wrong, but we remain your children. Spit out that anger, master!'

But the son said : 'Even excesses have a limit. You bear the pain and the torture till you can. When you can't, you die. If you cannot die, you kill.'

Bade Rai too approached the magistrate and said : 'I know the mistake is my brother's, but if the accused are allowed to go scotfree, life will become difficult for us zamindars. However shall we run our administration?' The magistrate gave him a very patient hearing, then made his comment :

'Times are standing on their head, Rai Sahib! Power can change hands any time. The British have a country of their own. They have simply to pack their bags and off they will go. But we have to spend the rest of our lives here. The next government will treat all men as equal. My friendly advice to you therefore is : Stop thinking of your own honour all the time, and learn to respect others too. All the witnesses Krishna Rai produced in court were his servants and employees. Subordinates, as you know, do not make good witnesses. Since they can't refuse to testify, they'll go only as far as a run-with-the-hare-and-hunt-with-the-hound policy will allow. Naturally, none of them stood up to the cross-examination. But even if you ignore these things, you cannot ignore the fact that piss is piss, no matter whose mouth it is aimed into. And no matter how degraded a man, how debased his spirit, there comes a time when his soul awakens. Yes, Rai Sahib, his soul awakens!'

Bade Rai had never been treated to such a long lecture by any official in his whole life. He listened quietly and took his leave. As he left, he said : 'Krishna Rai is my brother, but he is quite self-sufficient. I'm in no position to tell him anything. It was the

thought of family honour that dragged me here. Now I must go,'

'You're yourself an honorary magistrate. Please consider : Where does family honour lie? Does it lie in justice, or does it lie in having an innocent man declared guilty and punished?'

Bade Rai came away suitably chastened. But when the judgement was delivered both the sons were sentenced to two years' hard labour. All the others were acquitted. Higher courts acquitted the sons too. By the time they came out of prison, however, litigation had taken such a heavy toll of Mirchi that he passed away. Everything in his house, down to the last pieces of rag, had been sold to met the legal expenses. All the land they possessed was gone. Whoever remained also left for the city to work on daily wages, and never returned. The sister, the one who had helped Majhhale Rai escape, died recently. She used to say : 'An impulse had seized me; I wished to see whether we poor people have it in us to forgive and to have mercy as much as we have it in us to put up with tyranny and injustice. That impulse estranged me from my own people.' Her brothers never forgave her. Her husband, however, was proud of her.

The brothers had been acquitted 'with honour.' The phrase lanced Majhhale Rai to the quick : 'Their honour? And what about our honour?' He took their honourable discharge as his personal dishonour. Bade Rai too felt humiliated in his own way, although the magistrate's words echoed constantly in his memory. Despite the fact that the charges had not been proved, the magistrate had given the brothers two years to honour Bade Rai's word. But Majhhale Rai still thought that Bade Rai was behind the honourable discharge of the brothers, and he went around gabbing about it. People everywhere— in the family, in the community, the officer class— all took his talk with a pinch of salt, but still took pleasure in prodding him for details : Why did Bade Rai back the other side? Majhhale Rai had only one argument : 'Because he grudges me my son. He wanted me to die childless so that my share of the property could also pass to his sons. He moves around posing as a messenger of love and mercy; actually he is a stranger to both.

Love and mercy are indivisible qualities for me. Anyone who gets my love gets it in full, not piecemeal. I adopted a child, a child who needed love. The adoption liberated me and it liberated him too. That's his virtue. But Bade Rai looks at him and he doesn't think of all the children in the world; he thinks of an imaginary sin. Where is that sin? What has this child got to do with that sin? Is the child the sin? If he is, then all the children of the world are born of that same sin, no matter who commits it. If the legal sanction of marriage can redeem the sin, why can't love?'

People heard these things and carried tales to Bade Rai. Bade Rai stopped them short : 'Don't talk to me about him; don't push me into that morass.' Chhote Rai too tried to reason with him, but Majhhale Rai's visions of Bade Rai's hand behind the honourable acquittal of the two sons of Mirchi did not cease.

Around this time another incident took place which put the Rai family to a severe test. Soon after Rani's wedding, one day everyone was startled to see Bade Rai without his moustache. Bade Rai had always been counted as one of those few men who were in love with their moustache. He used to get the hair-dye for his moustache from England. Few people knew that his moustache was dyed. It took him an hour to groom his moustache. Raghubar now tells me that the love of moustache and turban is a feudal trait. After all, why this special concern for moustache hair? Hair is hair is hair! In what way is the beard inferior hair? Then why did Baba trim his moustache twice a day? Well, Baba is no more, and one can get away with whatever one wants to say. Had he been here, he would have given a fitting reply. A barber called every third or fourth day. He trimmed and smoothed the moustache. Every outsize hair was picked out. A hair out of place and the barber had it! Only when finally Bade Rai looked at himself in the mirror and issued a smile did the barber breathe a sigh of relief. Till then he looked like a goat confronting a lion— waiting to be devoured any moment. So he put his life in it and made sure the moustache was neatly and uniformly rounded. The rounded moustache gave a new dimension to Bade Rai's appearance.

'Bade Rai has shaved his moustache!' The news ran a tremor through the town. Something had surely happened— something big! Bade Rai was not the one to have the growth removed for fun. Maybe it was a vow he had taken : let my daughter be married and, O lord!, I'll offer you my moustache along with sweets!' There were others who thought the disappearance of the moustache had something to do with the disappearance of George. George was his pride and his glory, and he had failed to protect him, so what right had he to flaunt a moustache? His opponents whispered amongst themselves : George was his father. Wouldn't he tonsure and shave himself at his father's death? That helped them cope with their own sense of inferiority vis-a-vis Bade Rai.

But Bade Rai made no comment about the whole thing. He seemed to have reached a state of perfect equilibrium.

That equilibrium was thrown into a turmoil one night when, at a late hour, Radhika Babu, an old companion of Bade Rai, rode into the haveli in his coach. Radhika Babu used to be a regular visitor to the haveli in earlier days, but of late his visits had become irregular. His sudden appearance at the haveli seemed to hit Bade Rai with a force which perhaps even a sudden appearance of George the Fifth with his entire entourage of guardsmen and attendants would have failed in producing. For a moment his blood seemed to have stopped flowing— in the same way as they say waters in all the rivers of the world stops flowing at a certain moment everyday. The rivers, they say, momentarily rest their tired limbs— too momentary for us to see. God knows if they do actually rest, but, on second thoughts, they may well do, for don't we rest after hard work? Bade Rai's blood similarly resumed its flow the very next moment. He got up and embraced his friend.

Radhika Babu said :

'Swamiji was supposed to come today. He didn't. He has sent [illegible] instead.' He kept his voice low.

'I remember.'

'I've brought what you gave me for safekeeping.'

'I know that too.'

'So?'

'Can you hold on to it a little longer?'

'Sure. But today it's worth millions. Tomorrow it'll be worth nothing. Its price is the word it carries with it.'

Bade Rai closed his eyes. A little later, he said :

'You're right. Come with me.'

He took him to his room and closed the door. The room had a safe which no one had even seen being opened. Today he opened it, and then spoke to Radhika Babu :

'Radhika, this is the secret treasure of the Rai family. It has been preserved intact century after century. The property was divided from one generation to the next, but not this treasure. There has been an unstated assumption that this treasure would be opened only in the family's hour of crisis. That hour is perhaps here. Take whatever will repay your debt.'

'No, Hari Rai, no. This is your family wealth, the Lakshmi of your house!'

'So it is, but when has wealth been permanent? It comes and it goes. That it stayed this long is itself no small a miracle.'

'I don't understand.'

'You didn't come here to understand. Maybe some day we can both sit together and then you can understand. I'm only reading the writing on the wall. Go on, take it. Keep it safe, if possible. If ever I am able to put together the necessary amount, I'll come and redeem it. Teli Swamiji that if he saved my honour, I too kept faith with him.'

'No, Hari Rai. I have had the closest association with this family. . .'

'Let's not talk about that. That association came to an end the day I went to you and you told me : 'Hari Rai, who knows what the property will be worth after the regime has changed. Get me gold, if you have any.' That day my greed overcame me. I couldn't muster enough courage to mortgage this treasure. But later when I went to Swamiji, and Swamiji told me in your presence, 'Hari Rai, who do you worry? A single hair from your moustache is worth lakhs,' and something came over you and you said, 'Yes, you're right, Swamiji,' and I gave you a hair of my moustache and

you gave me the money. Were we playing Monopoly, Radhika? Many days passed and I told myself 'Those moustaches aren't your own any more, Hari Rai; how long are you going to sport them as your badge of honour?'

'I'm sorry, Hari Rai. I erred.'

'Not at all. You did the absolutely right thing. It's only moments like these which show up the true worth of a man. How'd I have got my daughter married if you hadn't come to my help? How'd I have come face to face to with this stark tragedy of my life, if I hadn't mortgaged my moustache? The fact was this property wasn't really mine, though I owned it. It wasn't mine because any day it could cease to be mine, and it could be someone else's. But the moustache was mine, only mine. The pain I suffered on account of them could not be expressed, could not be endured. That pain will be with me till my death.'

Radhika Babu took out a miniature velvet-lined case and extended it to Bade Rai. Bade Rai opened it, took out its contents, examined them and returned them to the box. In a low voice, he said :

'I am deeply grateful to you, Radhika, for granting such honour to me— you preserved it in a gold case! This hair did not belong to a god; it was no holy relic. It was a hair, a proud and vain hair— that belonged to a mortal kicked about like a football in the game of life, a hair that one spits out if it happens to enter one's mouth with food : one doesn't bother then that that means one morsel of food less for him, one whole morsel of destiny taken away from him!'

Radhika Babu picked out the amount of jewellery he estimated would fill in for the loan. When he got up to go, he found that he couldn't lift the bag, and Bade Rai had to lend a hand. When they came out of the room, many pairs of eyes were waiting for them. Bade Rai looked straight ahead, Radhika Babu down. The rest all gaped.

No sooner had Radhika Babu left than Bade Rai called everyone to a meeting. The secret which he had been nursing in the depths

of his consciousness was laid bare before everyone. Chhote Rai at first listened silently, but later he spoke, the first time ever in his life :

'Bade Bhaiya,' he said, 'When you mortgaged your moustache to secure a heavy loan like that, you didn't think it necessary to take us into confidence— why are you telling us all this now. . . now that the game is up? It'd have been better for you to keep your own counsel, now of all times. I can't help feeling that everything here—we ourselves, this land and property, this family treasure to which every generation must have added whatever it was worth— everything had but one fate— to be hostage to your moustaches.'

I was deeply hurt. I spoke without thinking :

'We'll sell part of the property and redeem the treasure.'

Bade Rai had not yet recovered from the blow Chhote Rai had delivered to him; now he delivered another :

'Bhaskar,' he said, 'It has all along been as Bade Bhaiya wished it to be. My share of the property has also been like your own. But now its real owner is Arun. I have transferred all my property to him and I have no rights over it. If you intend selling any property, see that none of it belongs to his share, or at least get his consent. He's, after all, your brother.'

Bade Rai raised his lowered eyes and looked at him— for the first time. He had been thinking about what he shouldn't have done and had done; now he started thinking about what Chhote Rai shouldn't have said but had said. Thin veins in his eyes which no one had ever known to exist stood out red and bulging. Chhote Rai's head was no longer held high as it had always been. You give what is yours freely to everyone and you look one way; you try to save from others' eyes what's yours so that you may not have to give, and you look another way. That's only natural.

Bade Rai said : 'So you'd been waiting for this day : Arun grows up and you change your colours.'

Bade Rai was refusing to concede defeat like the feudal satrap that he was. On the contrary, he was snorting like a wounded cobra. Chhote Rai had fallen silent.

Arun was studying engineering. Everyone was strangely excited about his studies, the way people are excited when the roof of their house under construction is to be laid. That included me. Whenever Arun was mentioned, my chest swelled with pride : my brother Arun will be the first engineer of this town. In those days there were no degree-holding engineers. Students passed the overseer's exam and were taken into jobs, where they were promoted engineers. But Arun was going to be the genuine thing— a degree-holding engineer. The entire north India had only one engineering college : the Thomson Engineering College at Roorkee. Similarly, there was only one medical college : the King George Medical College, Lucknow. That remains a college even today, but Thomson College has turned a university. Graduates of both these colleges earned a lot of name far and wide. They were the big bosses. The people who actually built the structures and executed the training programme were the workers and the labourers. Arun too was part of this set-up. We used to fantasize about him : He is a canal engineer— the big boss. He is on tour. A train of canal engineers on horses follows him. There are the menials running after the horses on foot. They are collecting even the horseshit in their turbans. Actually, the only branch of engineering at this Engineering College at that time was Civil Engineering, and it awarded both degrees and diplomas.

Arun had flunked the Intermediate Examination once, but Bade Rai did some running around, and Arun was admitted to the degree course at Roorkee. The sons of the British too came to Roorkee for engineering studies. The students had lessons in swimming and horse-riding; they dressed for dinner and wore uniforms to classes. When they passed out they were *pucca sahibs*, and like the *pucca sahibs*, they spoke their mother tongue with an accent. The teachers were mostly English, and we were proud of the fact that Arun studied with English teachers. There was no doubt now that he would pass out as a *pucca sahib*. Occasionally, Chhote Rai would get fits of Gandhism and then he wondered if Arun would keep his lines with the common man open like Gandhi, Nehru and Subhash Bose. But he allowed this wonder to be replaced quickly by his pride in Arun. Once in a while it happened that

while Chhote Rai was singing praises of Arun, an old Congress friend cut him short with 'Raghav Bhai, there was a time when you were about to give up everything to become a follower of Gandhi, and now you have all but become a follower of your Sahib-to-be son. Don't you see, Raghav Babu, these are our enemies the British are raising on our own soil with our own resources? You'll see this when the Englishmen are gone and the brown Englishmen take their place. You think the kick that the Englishman plants on your back hurts? Wait till you receive the kick of the brown Englishman. Mark my words, the wound it causes will suppurate like a festering sore.'

This would shake Chhote Rai a little, but he had become adept in turning points around : 'You're right,' he would say, 'Why should we receive the Englishman's kicks in perpetuity? He kicks us and then he throws us out in the sun; if our own man kicks us, he'll at least lay us out in the shade. And Arun is different. He has grown up with the values of Bade Rai. I wanted to be something but couldn't make it. Shall I let go even that which has landed on my plate now?'

His friends laughed. 'So you have conceded defeat. No wonder. One can't get very far on an unfamiliar road with a pencil light as one's only help, can one? Had you walked that road you'd have travelled very far today. When the country is free, and the people independent, everyone will be equal; our only badge will be our country. Your son will then be serving not the British sahibs but the common Indian, to make roads in villages and towns, to build canals. . . There'll be no servants and no masters; everyone will have to work with his hands.'

Chhote Rai laughed it off. 'Most of our thinking is plain fat which only serves to make padding; only a small part of it is lean which turns into muscle,' he said.

Some of his friends took offence at this and said : 'We knew it all along. Basically you are feudal, aren't you? You joined us only because it was the fashionable thing to do then. You thought someday it'll come in handy, and you'll be able to cash it, didn't you?'

Chhote Rai never took offence. With a smile, he said :

'Such people will always be there. You don't think they will disappear after independence, do you?'

We were all thrilled with the impending elevation of Arun to the status of a *sahib*. Soon he will graduate and the star of this family will rise again. Its shaky foundations will firm up once more. The officers of the town will see that the Rai family is capable of producing an officer, and their eyes will take on a deeper shade of respect. They'll extend to us the courtesies one officer extends to another! Whenever Arun was home on holiday, Bade Rai took him to the club and introduced him to to the sahibs : 'My younger son. Studies engineering at Roorkee.'

The Indians among the officers expressed delight in meeting him, but inwardly they were sick with jealousy. The British had a totally different attitude. They looked on him as a proselytizing missionary looks upon a potential convert. After a prolonged handshake, they entertained him with interesting questions and stories. Arun enjoyed their company thoroughly. Never for a moment did they let him have the feeling that they belonged to the ruling class and he to the ruled. You must go to England for higher studies, they told him. In those days, only sons of high families could dream of going to Vilayet; now everyone dreams of it. Not just dreams of it, but actually makes it. The meaning of 'Vilayet' itself has changed. Then it meant only England, now it means a lot more. People heard of America, Germany, Russia, France etc. only during the war. Another reason why sons of high families craved for England was the pictures of a certain kind that hung in the walls of their houses. These were pictures of English mems (ladies)— English mem in the bath, English mems walking a dog, English mem dancing with the English Sahib, English mem playing the piano. To be sure, these pictures decorated the high family homes to please the sahibs, but they tugged at the heartstrings of our young masters and transported them in to the land where these white fairies lived and from where they made their long-range expeditions into their dreams. It was very common among *bhābhīs*, *māmīs*, *dādīs* and mothers, when their hearts

overflowed with pride on the performance of the apples of their eyes, to say 'My sweetiepie is going to marry a mem!' It's another matter that in homes where the mems had effected an entry, it was precisely these *bhābhīs* and *chāchīs* and. . . who had been the first to raise the banner of revolt. But the fact remained that mems were mentioned in these homes again and again and this worked as a mental laxative for our young *beaux*.

Dreams of England had already been implanted in Arun's mind, though our haveli was quite untainted with portraits of British mems. But then the kothi where Majhhale Rai lived had an interesting collection of them, and it wasn't the case that Arun never visited the kothi. And when he did, he made it a point to lift the quilted covers that protected the pictures, and to watch. All full-length pictures had red quilt covers on them, and the mirrors too. Whenever there was an occasion, the covers were removed, the pictures were dusted and wiped, and the mems brought to their full glory. Another thing. Arun had been meeting mems in person from childhood in the company of Bade Rai. As a child, he also had an English friend— the daughter of an English Joint Magistrate. The Joint Magistrate's father had been a clergyman in India, so the whole family had a smattering of Urdu. They even spoke Urdu. Urdu was the language in fashion then, even though one might use Hindi when speaking. The Joint Magistrate became a minister in the British cabinet in later years. His daughter was a regular visitor to India, and Arun too met her on a couple of occasions, but that's a much later story. The only point relevant to the time was that Arun had framed in his heart a picture of Mary which beckoned to him from England.

The Joint Magistrate and Bade Rai occasionally exchanged a harmless joke relating to the two kids. The Joint Magistrate would say : 'Well, Mr. Rai. Will you accept my daughter as your *bahu?*'

'This little bird of a daughter of yours will one day pick up my son in its bill like a twig and off it'll go flying. . .' Bade Rai would say.

The Joint Magistrate laughed. Perhaps this exchange lingered

somehere in Arun's mind. Altogether, layers upon layers of such memories were stacked in Arun's mind. Exposed to the uninhibited behaviour of the sahibs in the Engineering college, these layers began to unfold one by one, and as soon as he passed the engineering course, he raised the issue : he wanted to go to England to continue his studies. This issue immediately separated us in our opinions as if someone had squeezed lemon in milk. The long-suppressed differences amongst us now rose to the surface.

No matter how Arunized Chhote Rai had become, a thin stream of patriotic fervour still flowed in his veins. Bade Rai was foresighted and apprehensive. We might well be rich and well-off, but England was the land of kings, he felt. The wealth and the splendour of that country, the altogether different character and values of those people, will, beyond a doubt, turn our Arun into a stranger to us. He had heard that lower class English mems took all Indians to be princes and tried to ensnare them, hoping to ensure a life of pleasure and riches for themselves. What had transpired with the son of Rai Bahadur Chandrika Prasad still sent a shiver down his spine every time Bade Rai was reminded of it.

He had gone to England lured by the charm of the I.C.S. Once there, the lure of an English mem proved stronger and more irresistable and he promptly fell into her trap. He ordered money, and more money, from home, and home kept on sending money and more money, which, as an accomplice in his life of pleasure, she used to good effect. Then one day, she just walked out of his life hand-in-hand with another, new-found partner. In those days, 'to walk out,' in fact, meant 'to walk out with.' In our society, on the other hand, the very concept of giving up one's husband to set up house with another man was unknown. If it was at all known, it was confined to the lowest stratum of the society. There they didn't even have to separate formally— you only paid a fine to the Panchayat and served a feast to the caste brotherhood, and you were free to do as you pleased. To be fair, considering the times, the fine and the feast were no mean punishment.

When the Rai Bahadur's son returned, he was an empty shell. The pupils of his eyes were like the black tips of a burnt-out wick.

The Rai Bahadur had to spend a fortune on purification and penance ceremonies. The son always stayed by himself. At times, you felt he was a smouldering log left over after the Holi fire. When the question of his marriage was raised, everyone in the brotherhood turned their faces away. Bade Rai thought of all these things and was filled with horror. *Chachi* was crying herself sick. She was filled with the apprehension that she would die while Arun was still in England, that he would not be there to light her funeral pyre. That was exactly what happened later. But I was backing Arun. I argued that I myself had not been able to go to England, but that was because I had not been able to complete my studies. Why should anyone take away Arun's right to achieve his goal now that he had completed his studies and was an engineer?

He came to me and pleaded; 'Bhaiya,' he said, 'Did you train me to be an engineer so that I should serve these Indian sahibs? Shall I sacrifice myself to the superstitions of this aging generation? I want to become a world-famous engineer and earn the distinction of making the finest building in India. And if I am unable to achieve my ambition, I find no point in living. . .'

It was, of course, a very late discovery on my part that everything he had told me then was plain bluff; at that moment, however, the image of our dying mother drew up before my eyes. She had entrusted Arun to me and Rani : 'Your father never had, nor will ever have, any time for the family.' It is usual for zamindars to treat their household as their empire, but the presiding queen of our 'empire' was no better than a bonded slave woman. She told me : 'Take this responsibility yourself, and look after the family. Treat Arun as a son. An elder brother is like a father, an elder sister has bit of the mother in her.' When mother was no more, Arun clung to Rani, or to Bhavani. He stationed himself at Rahmatullah's shop and was forever waiting, either for Bade Rai, or for Chhote Rai, or for me. Come evening, and he would go to sleep with his head in Rani's lap as if that was where his entire world of dreams lay centred. Kala loved him most of all. Rupa's lap probably he had entered only once to honour a wedding ritual. When Raghubar was not yet born, Kala used to say : 'We needn't

worry. Why should we? Arun is as good as our own son.' Of course, after Raghubar's birth, she didn't live long. Actually, enter Raghubar, exit Kala. Now I felt as if Kala was standing before me and asking me : 'Tell me, if it was your Raghubar standing before you asking for something, would you turn him away?' Was it in answer to this question? Was it an impulse? I don't know, but what I said to Arun was : 'Yes, you will go. I'll see to it that you go.'

Arun clasped me in his embrace. I felt it was Raghubar and he had suddenly grown up.

Sometimes Rani wrote to us. She inquired after her younger brother and the nephew and the niece. She was specially solicitous about Arun. 'Please look after him— he's so lonely now. Also ask *bhabhi* to look after that motherless kid. I know that Sona and Raghubar too are motherless, but they have a mother in *bhabhi*. Arun knew me as the only mother he had, and I had to leave him. And so tied up I am, I can't find time to come and see him, He didn't visit me even on the last *Bhaiyādūj*. Simply wrote to say he was too busy with his studies, but I know he has lost all attachment to me. What can I tell him when I myself feel so helpless? I guess that's the fate of all girls : Born and brought up in one soil, they are transplanted into another soil of relationships, and that's where they must stay— to live or to die.'

Arun too thought of Rani often, but he avoided visiting her. Rani had two sons. Being a zamindar's on, her husband was averse to any kind of work. He preferred to stay at home and busied himself with stitching and cooking and things like that rather than going out to work. He avoided going out. Rani, on the other hand, was accustomed to men going out to work. Sometimes he even hit her, but Rani put up with everything silently. When Bade Rai heard of these things, he only sighed : 'Unhappy is the world of the man whose daughter has to suffer thus.'

We got to know of these things rather late. Once Raghubar went to visit his *buā* and saw her being beaten up. He was so scared that he started crying. Rani's father-in-law was a wealthy

man, but he spared little for Rani's family. At most, they would get a year's supplies. Rani's husband had to provide for the rest, which he did either by selling land or raising loans. When Bade Rai got to know of this, he started sending them some help every month. Whenever Rani came on a visit to us and met Bade Rai or me, she cried, as if complaining. And then I thought of those lines of the folksong :

To my brother you gave a palace or two
Me you exiled so far away from you. ..

But no one asked how she was, and she never said a word. Then she walked into the haveli, where every inch of the walls bore the imprint of her hands, and every inch of the floor bore her footprints. Now they looked strange to her. The happiness she had seen at her father's house now scared her. Did she have a right to it now? Or would her contact cast a bane on it?

Rajmohan, Rani's elder son, often told us : 'Behind our *Baba's* sitting room there is a small cell. A lamp of ghee is burning there day and night. That's where all *Baba's* wealth is stored. When he enters the cell, his head is bowed in reverence.' And then he would get bitter. With clenched teeth, he would say : 'When I grow up, I'll kill *Baba* and take away all his money— he gives it to Chhote Chacha and none to our father!' The Chhote Chacha he referred to was his present grandmother's son. The grandmother was still living. Grandfather had fobbed off his father and the Bade Chacha with small pieces of land. The magnificent wedding that Bade Rai had given his daughter had had no effect on Rani's life. Bade Rai regretted this fact. The family treasure raided, a Lakshman-like brother lost, and the daughter was still unhappy! Now Majhhale Rai had a piece of advice to give Chhote Rai whenever they ran into each other, and it was : 'Don't pay a price for your son which will make him a destitute in later life! A change had come over Chhote Rai lately. He had begun to keep his mouth shut before Majhhale Rai. The things Majhhale Rai said about Bade Rai had now also begun to leave a mark on his mind, although the mark was still a feeble one— like a mark left by a ploughshare on hard dry ground.

Arun had left for England. I had to face the dipleasure of both Bade and Chhote Rai for this. Chhote Rai had changed a lot lately: he was getting more and more attached to money. Whenever the question arose of sending money to Arun, he would disclaim any responsibility, saying : 'Both of us brothers were against it, so it's none of our business. Now it's wholly upto you.' But where could I get the money from, dependent as I was on these two zamindars? They were the real owners. I had no money I could call my own, not even a salary. My needs were, of course, all taken care of. When I sent Arun to England, I was banking on the two brothers. After all, both of them, in their separate ways, were his fathers; neither, in the heart of his hearts, was averse to the idea of sending him to England. Both of them were, however, a bit scared. I had of course favoured sending Arun to England, but had the two of them been dead set against it, there would have been no question of his going at all. Bade Rai understood my dilemma, so whenever Chhote Rai wriggled out of his responsibility, he saw to it that some provision was made, though he was always careful to make it appear as if he had nothing to do with the whole business. In this hide-and-seek game of the two cats, I was the hapless mouse!

No one was happier than me whenever we received a letter from Arun. I went around telling everyone that my brother Arun had written to me from England. Somehow I had got it into my head that our return to the glorious days of the past only awaited Arun's return from England. The moment he landed in India money would come down in torrents. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, would herself oblige us with a dance in the house. All the debts would be cleared— yes, that was the greatest worry. All the IOUs bore my signatures. Earlier it was Dīwānjī who used to sign. Then there was the treasure mortgaged with Radhika Babu. Sometimes I even fantasized that Arun would return with a car each for Bade Rai and Chhote Rai, or would at least buy one on return. I didn't need one : I could make do with a horsecoach or a bicycle. Cars were very few then; the car-culture was still in the future. The car wasn't actually considered a trustworthy vehicle. An animal could be tied or beaten or subjected to some other such treatment to

make it behave, but a machine? It could pull to a halt anywhere and refuse to budge. Or jump into a river and take you with it! Took you to your destination fast both in this and the next world. You fall down from a horse and people say :

It's only the brave and the daring
Who fall from a horse raring. . .

but no laurels are to be won if you are in a car and the car falls into a ditch! No wonder there are no rhymes about it. The horse knows and acknowledges the rider; this useless vehicle doesn't even acknowledge God. No different from a mem actually : Mem and machine, machine and mem. Be ready to be a slave, if you have them! But there were some points in its favour too : The car needs fuel only when it runs; the animal needs it running or standing. Doesn't work its mouth all the while, chewing cud or otherwise. And doesn't make a mess. I must say I simply loved cars.

Then I wondered : Why am I thinking all this? The day is still far, for away when Arun will be home, Lakshmi will dance and the dark clouds will lift. Saranga was more sensible in this respect— a fact I realized rather late. She would first give me a patient ear, then make her comments :

'Don't look so far into the future,' she would say, 'The tiniest fleck of cloud is enough to hide the rays of the sun falling on your chest. And if it's your own brother, it hurts more if he fails you. Failed by a brother, bitten by a dog— they die thirsting the most!'

I thought that was stupid. She came out with such gems pretty often and invariably assumed an I-had-told-you-so attitude later. I was beginning to suspect that she was the victim of a complex-- - maybe it had to do with Bade Rai, or perhaps with Raghubar, or maybe Sona and Arun. . .

Sona went to school. That was all. The rest of the time she had to be at home. Nobody then quite realized how difficult it must be for one to remain confined to the home all the time. Of course, everyone realizes it now. Home was supposed to the natural place

for a woman to be in. All the time. Raghubar's daughter, that is, my granddaughter, simply assumes that the outside world is as much a girl's domain as a boy's. Raghubar, of course, shared Bade Rai's room. His schoolbag, his clothes, his playthings— they were all now kept in Bade Rai's room. As a result, Bhavani's duties had now multiplied. Of course, another reason was that the number of servants had gone down. It wasn't quite easy to look after the needs of the youngest and the oldest member in the family. Everybody else too, when under pressure, would simply yell for Bhavani. Any special guests, it was Bhavani again. Special needs at special hours— only Bhavani knew them. He had become the symbol of the Rai honour and the purveyor of its comforts. And, of course, he fulfilled an emotional need of everyone in the family. Every joy and every sorrow that affected anyone in the family affected him too. Saranga says a harsh word to Sona, Bhavani is hurt; there's a tiff between Bade Rai and Chhote Rai, it's Bhavani who's sulking; me and Saranga have a row, Bhavani has a long face!

Chhoti Chachi was ill. Bhavani took time off from his duties and sat with her. Massaged her soles with oil; applied gentle press on her head and forehead. Actually, in our family, only maids were supposed to work with women, but Bhavani's vocation of service had raised him above the male-female divide. If Chachi's condition worsened some day, he would keep a watch on her all night, dozing off occasionally. One call from someone, and he was alert as ever. He was like the lightning conductor which absorbs all lightning strikes and takes all the shocks.

Chhoti Chachi was getting worse by the day. That left Sona and Saranga to fend for themselves. Saranga was barely out of her teens, though she enjoyed the elevated title of the mistress of the house. Becoming the mistress of a house is not known to add years to your age. If I remember correctly, Sona and Saranga were about ten years apart. Saranga had not yet been able to make up her mind whether Sona was a daughter to her, or was 'like a daughter.' Being a daughter and being 'like a daughter' are two very different things, as far apart from one another as heaven is from earth. The mother exercises rights over the daughter and the daughter over

the mother. But being 'like a daughter' often puts a question mark over the rights of the mother. This was no ordinary tussle. Sona saw Saranga as the usurper of her mother's position— a position she considered so sacrosanct that only her true mother had a right to it. Even after her death! The way she looked at it if her mother could be removed from her position, she and her brother too could be replaced by two other kids. It does sometimes so transpire that a person becomes more obsessed with her rights that with her duties. One day Saranga went hammer and tongs at Sona for something. Though possessed of a sharp one, Sona at first held her tongue; then, as if scoring a direct hit at Saranga, she cut loose :

'Would a mother ever say 'Millstones round my neck, that's what you two are!'?'

Had Saranga also held her usually sharp tongue, the matter would have blown over, but she retorted in heat :

'Why didn't you two also pop off with her?'

Bhavani was with Chachi. At first Chachi kept calling out to both of them, then, getting no attention, she sent Bhavani. 'What's going to be Sona's fate after me,' she said miserably. Bhavani came out and heard Saranga's remark. He at once said :

'Bahuji, they're your own kids. Don't say such things. They crave your love and your blessings.'

Sona was very angry. She could not hold herself and shouted : 'We're not her children; we're our mother's children.'

Saranga, totally at a loss, slapped her hard.

It was as if a knife had struck Bhavani in the heart.

'Bahuji, that was not right. Hitting Sona was not right. In this house, children have never been treated that way.'

Saranga burst.

'Don't talk above your station. You're a servant, behave like one! How dare you insult me like that? I'll see who stays in this house, you or me! Stirring up the kids like that!

'Please, Bahuji, do not speak like that. . .' Bhavani's voice cracked.

When I returned home that evening, Saranga was as usual in a sulk. No straight answers to my questions. This was quite usual with her. When she was angry, she almost lost her voice, as if

she had been starved. You could immediately make out that something was wrong. I was beginning to realize that a sharp difference of age in married couples makes itself felt more acutely with advancing years. I kept prodding her and she kept putting me off. Actually she was only giving an edge to my impatience. Women are not all frailty : they know their strength only too well. This strength may be limited, but they know how to use it to good effect. A man, on the other hand, not only makes a great show of his strength, but also wastes it on pointless pursuits. When she finally calculated that my impatience had reached the bursting point and I could not possible contain myself any longer, she exploded:

'You ask me what happened! You. . . you have brought me here as a maid, as one worse than a maid. You are all upper-class people; for you, only your honour is what counts. I am lower class, but I did get two square meals a day at home, and I don't eat pearls for lunch here either! We may be lower class but we know how to respect human beings better than you upper-class people do. Your daughter tells me I am not her mother. I am her enemy. Your servants insult me; they tell me everything I do is wrong! Whatever did my parents think when they pushed me into this house? Money? Houses? Land? What good are they to me? To me my little lower- class pleasures were any day better than the big pleasures of this upper-class house.'

The way Saranga built up the tempo, I lost my reason. Without thinking, I yelled for Sona. She came, cowering and terror- stricken. 'You called your mother your enemy ?Your tongue is getting bigger everyday; I'll cut it down to size right now!'

She was shivering with fear, but managed to speak :

'No, father, I didn't say that. It was she who told us : 'Why didn't you two also pop off with your mother?'

That set me afire.

'Aren't you ashamed to lie?' screamed Saranga. 'I'd have buried you alive, had you been my daughter.'

I don't remember what overcame me then. I let myself loose on both of them. One blow on Saranga's back, another one on Sona's. Sona had stopped making any sounds, but Saranga was shrieking : 'Kill me, kill me— that was why you brought me here,

didn't you? Kill me!'

I left them whimpering and rushed downstairs. At the doorstep, I shouted for Bhavani. As he appeared, I swiped him across the face as I screamed : 'How dare you? How dare you go and talk to the women of the house like that? Who do you think you are?'

Bhavani cast a glance at me and walked out. He was weeping but quietly. He knew the limits to his weeping. His only regret was that he had been a playmate of the youngest Rai— we had grown up together— and yet I hadn't even found it necessary to ask him what was what before starting to heap accusations on him. He didn't mind the beating, but the accusations he did. What would Bade Rai think if he got to know of it?

I had lost my head. I felt like a crazed bull who had entered a glassware shop and would not rest till he had run through every piece in the shop. Just then Chhote Rai walked in. Bhavani was going out, weeping. That's all a helpless man can do to help himself: weep. As against this, a man in a strong enough position to extort a price from others considers that to be his greatest strength. The more the other person loses his defences, the greater is the rapacity of the tyrant. If one can stand up to tyranny, this rapacity can be stopped in its tracks. Chhote Rai persuaded Bhavani to return, but he kept on pleading : 'Let me go, please! My time in this house is up! That was all the service I was fated to give this family.'

Raghubar was with Chhote Rai. They had returned from a walk together. When he saw Bhavani crying, he too joined him. 'Bhavani Kākā, don't cry, please don't cry!' he repeated as he cried himself. Chhote Rai got Bhavani to sit down, tried to calm him, offered him a glass of water. Bhavani didn't say a word either against me or against Saranga. He was only repeating : 'I've lost the right to serve this house. Bhaskar Bhaiya was right to punish me. It was my fault. I shouldn't have interfered in family matters. After all, I'm only a servant.'

Chhote Rai had grasped the situation, and his only concern now was to see that the matter did not reach Bade Rai's ears, despite the fact that a slight tension now separated the two. Ever since the adoption of Arun, Chhote Rai was becoming conscious of his rights in the family. Thus far Bade Rai had behaved as if he owned everything. He had sold not only his own share of land but Chhote Rai's as well. Tension started building up from the day Chhote Rai objected to the sale of his land and forbade it. He regretted it later. He had even apologised to Bade Rai : 'I don't know what came over me that day, Bade Bhaiya, that I didn't watch my words. Maybe it was my love for Arun. He too is your son. For me it's just a comforting thought that he's mine. At that moment I happened to put myself in your place, and that was my biggest lapse.' Bade Rai had simply patted his shoulder. Arun had now taken Bade Rai's place as Chhote Rai's greatest weakness.

Chhote Rai called me. Before him, I was tongue-tied. What I had done was now tormenting me. Why did I do It? Why did I allow myself to be carried away? Why did I take such a drastic step before first finding out the facts? Chhote Rai had taken Sona away with him and she had told him the facts as they were. Her back was inflamed. Chhote Rai was moved to see it. He muttered: 'Strange are the ways of the world! You have no kids and you would give anything to have one; you have kids and this is how you treat them!' To me he said : 'O.K. So you were angry. And you thought everyone was to blame, but before you went berserk, shouldn't you have given thought at least once to the consequences of your action? Don't think I don't know what Saranga is going through. I do. I do very well indeed. I also know your problem. But I think of what your behaviour with *bahu*, Sona and Bhavani is going to do to them and I shudder. The child cannot speak, nor can the servant. What can however happen is that the sheer realization of their helplessness may turn their love for you into hatred. I'll talk to *bahu*. If it's possible for you to bring yourself to do it, go and talk to Sona and to Bhavani, You've wounded their feelings, and feelings, once hurt, are not easy to restore to health.

Sona stayed away from me that day. I called out to Bhavani, as if nothing had happened. He came and stood before me silently. I said : 'Are you so angry with me? You're going to leave the house just because of me? The mistake was mine, why punish the others?'

With folded hands, he begged : 'Don't say that, Bhaiya! Don't sentence me to suffer in the fires of hell.'

I can't help feeling today that man also uses word to exploit feelings.

Raghubar went to bed rather early that day.

Saranga sat behind the curtain. Chhote Rai was talking to her. It was a one-sided dialogue. Explaining, trying to make someone see reason, persuading— they are all one-sided activities anyway. Chhote Rai was in full flow :

'Bahu, these two kids are motherless. It's not that I don't understand your suffering, but can you cure that suffering by making these kids suffer? Disslove your laughter into theirs, make their suffering your own, and you'll feel a mother awakening within you— a mother for whom all the children of the world are her own. Every woman dreams of becoming that mother. Don't let Raghubar and Sona feel that you are no one of theirs. You are their mother, you are everyone's mother in this family— including the old, the young and the servants. I know that by thrusting such a weighty responsibility on you, I'm not being fair to you. This is not your age for shouldering responsibilities, but this house has its compulsions, and the selfish interests of all of us. Maybe it is unjust to you, but you'll have to take it in the spirit of sacrifice and self-denial and bear it. Every woman, from Draupadi down to you, has been taken to be a living embodiment of sacrifice and self-denial, because that's where everyone's selfish interests lie! As I lecture you on the value of sacrifice and self-denial, I am also well aware that asking others to follow a path on which one has oneself not taken even the first step is manipulating others. Bhavani too is taking the place of the mother of us all. There is so much love in that man that we're all submerged in it. I'm telling you all

this not as your uncle-in-law but as your father. True, your parents are those who give you birth, but, as a daughter, those who accept you and espouse you are your parents too. And we have accepted and espoused you.'

He stopped for a breath, then continued :

'Your *Chachi* too is counting her last days. Her son is away in England. Her pain and her pleasure, her joy and her sorrow, everything is right here— in you. Don't let her feel unwanted. The mere suspicion of this is enough to take years off her life. A dying old person and a growing child— both look for support from the dear and the near ones. We depend for support on your husband the way the pipal plants bursting from the crannies depend for support on the wall beneath them.'

Saranga coughed intermittently to indicate that she was listening.

By the time Bade Rai returned, the storm in the teacup (more appropriately, in the pitcher) had subsided. Sona was still awake. She was waiting for Bade Rai to call her so that she could spill out everything, and Bade Rai could take new mother to task. But the silence all round held. Sona couldn't get an opening. Waiting for Bade Rai's summons, she fell asleep.

It was barely dawn. Chaudhri Khemraj Singh, father of Vir Bahadur Singh, I.C.S., suddenly landed at our doorstep. This was a very rare occurrence— almost totally unknown. Bade Rai got up at once and said :

'Please come, *Bhaiyey*.'

Everyone called him *Bhaiyey*. The reason for this nickname probably was that he himself addressed everyone close to him as *'Bhaiyey.'* He came in and practically collapsed into the chair. An attendant, carrying his baggage, followed him. One of the boxes, which he carried on his head, seemed to be particularly heavy. The baggage was despatched to the guests' quarters. Anxious, Bade Rai asked him :

'You look worried and fatigued, *Bhaiyey*. Is anything the matter?'

He kept quiet for a minute, then said :

'My old age is ruined, *Bhaiyey.* I'd never imagined my son would so tarnish the honour of my ancestors while I still lived, so horrendously, so irredeemably. . .'

'What's that you're saying? Vir Bahadur is one in a million.'

'I too had been nursing that illusion. My joy knew no bounds. But now I know he's not my son, not born of my seed. Bastard! God knows whose seed he was. If the old woman were alive, I'd ask her whose seed it was she carried in her womb for nine months.'

'Come on! Tell me what happened. Don't keep beating around the bush.'

'How can I bring it my to lips? The fellow has killed a woman in love and is now in jail. Had he not been an I.C.S., they'd have dragged him through the streets.'

'But how. . .?'

'How does one kill a woman? Why does one kill a woman? Don't you know?'

'I strongly suspect he has been framed.'

'How I wish it were so! *Bahu* came with two maids from her parents.' One of them grew up to be quite a beauty. And that was that.'

'Where's *Bahu?*'

'Right there.'

I was absolutely still and didn't know what to think. Bade Rai sat holding his head in his hands. The image of the Jointess, Vir Bahadur's wife, flashed before my eyes again and again. I felt she was standing behind the door calling me; 'Come here! My! My! How have you grown! You have kids too! Look at me— I'm still the same. Haven't you done better, do you think?' She was laughing. The eyes, the smile— everything exactly the same. Her maid? Which maid? That girl in her young teens, always standing behind her? She surely had sharp features, a dark complexion, a full body, but then she herself was for more of a beauty!

Chaudhri Sahib said :

'You're an old friend, *Bhaiyey.* I have come to ask a favour of you. Please take up the case. Go to him and tell him money is

no consideration, but he must get rid of this blot.'

'Sure. Let's go. I'll go with you.'

'If I could go, would I come to you? Wouldn't I be with him now? Even if the law acquits him, this old man will never set eyes on him again. What's written, what's read and what's heard— that makes the law— not what you see! Law can turn truth into falsehood and falsehood into truth. He who knows the truth may not be in a position to punish the guilty, but he can't pardon them either. I've already passed my judgement. You may ask why this drama then? Why go to court and contest the case? My answer is 'Because I am a father.' That's a duty I must fulfil. One day I'll be dead and up there his mother will want to know. What shall I tell her? Her love for her child must win at the end, though I may also want to ask her a few questions.'

Bade Rai pondered a little, then said :

'It'll be the way you want it, *Bhaiyey*. But tell me this : you feel so strongly responsible to your dead wife but not to your living son. Why?'

'Bade Rai, we two are fellow-travellers on the same boat. Aren't you reminded of your wife whenever something out of the ordinary takes place in your house— good or bad? Don't you turn to her and tell her : 'Do you see? Do you see what's happening?' Though you know full well that even if she were alive she'd be every bit as helpless as your are. The wife, Bade Rai, is always the stronger person. The husband leans on her for support and emotionally takes the presence of that support for granted. Almost exactly in the same way in which a child leans on his mother and assumes her presence. The child learns his lessons in accountability from her— making little promises in season and out of it, keeping and breaking them, telling truths and falsehoods, submitting petitions of mercy, holding her responsible for his own wrongdoings— and all the while she knows what's what. And what does a father get from his children? Nothing except the joy of being a father. When the time comes for the sons to shoulder the responsibility, they may or may not be available. Had Vir bahadur any notion of the responsibility that I carry, I'd not be witness to

what I see today. I'm accountable to his mother. She was accountable to me. If we ever stand face to face again, we'll have much to say to each other, many sorrows to share, many complaints to make, but finally it'll be silence that'll reign.' His voice trembled and the words trailed away.

Bade Rai did not think it wise to persist with the topic. Both of them were riding a cresting wave of emotion. The truth of *Bhaiyey's* remarks was reflected in Bade Rai's eyes. They both rode the wave for some time. When they finally dismounted, Bade Rai said :

'I assure you I shall go. I'll also take Bhaskar with me. When Vir Bahadur and Krishna Rai were both posted at Mau, Bhaskar had visited *bahu* once. He'll make it easier for me to talk to her.'

Thakur Sahib called for his box, and unlocked it with a key that was tied in the sacred thread round his neck. The box had athamāsās, silver rupees and some currency notes. Some jewellery too.

'Keep this box, Bade Rai,' he said : 'Use as much as you need. If there's any left over I'll collect it.'

Bade Rai cast a glance at the box and said :

'Don't drag me so low, Thakur Sahib. If I need it, I'll ask for it. I'm too old to accept such risks. I believe I must now accept things on trust only if I have the capacity to return them. The walls of this haveli themselves are now palsied; the foundations are out of joint. They quake and tremble. In the circumstances, it's impossible for me to accept this on trust. I'm sorry.'

Thakur Sahib insisted, but Bade Rai was unbending. Finally when he left, Thakur Sahib managed to leave a naulī behind.

Bade Rai was afraid of himself— an experience quite new to him.

I accom anied Bade Rai to Lucknow. There we got the whole story. It shook me. It was the same maid, part of Vir Bahadur's dowry, who had been shot. Vir Bahadur was home alone that night. He was getting ready to take the body away for disposal, when a colleague, also a neighbour, dropped in. After talking shop for a

few minutes, he left. Vir Bahadur had a strong suspicion that the maid was having an affair with this man. Vir Bahadur himself had taken a fancy to that woman. When he found her missing from her bed that night, he knew the woman was taking him for a ride. The neighbour was young and unmarried and a frequent visitor. He often dropped in for a chat, tea or dinner. It was during these visits that he started his affair with the maid. When he heard a bullet shot from the direction of the house, he came and checked. Everything was normal. He, however, had a suspicion, it wasn't clear why, that the sound came from Vir Bahadur's bungalow. Vir Bahadur was very much senior to him. For the past few days he had been noticing a change in Vir Bahadur's behaviour. He had finally mustered courage and walked upto Bahadur's house. Though Bahadur had been startled to see him, he had acquired so much skill from years of administrative experience that he didn't let any of his feelings show in his face while he tried to read the thoughts of the other man in his face. The man took his seat and asked : 'Sir, when's bhabhi coming back?' Vir Bahadur smiled and said : 'I should be worrying about that, not you.' He felt a little uncomfortable, but laughed it off.

He came back again at night. Mr. Bahadur was trying to load the body in the boot of the car with the help of an old and trusted servant. This time Mr. Bahadur almost ticked him off : 'Why don't you get married— so restless!' Later he realized that it had been a mistake to treat him like this. When the visitor had gone, he stuffed the body into the boot and drove about eight to ten miles on the Sitapur Road. It was absolutely deserted. He tied a big stone to the body and pushed it into the river from the bridge. There was a big splash. Water jumped many feet, how many, it was difficult to say in the dark. Standing on the bridge, Vir Bahadur could avoid being caught in the returning spray, at least for the moment : the splash was all that he heard. The heavy silence that followed was however more terrifying. He tried to look down into the darkness, but all the darkness seemed to have gathered in a concentrated mass there. He couldn't see anything. At the far end, where the river reached a bend, a fire was burning. The light

reflected in the waves created a staircase over which flowed the water. Further down, there was more darkness.

What had driven Vir Bahadur to desperation was her flat denial that that night she had been anywhere near the other man. Bahadur's wife was away. In the most intimate moments, he had wanted her to tell him where she had been that night and what her relations with him were. And she had flatly denied everything! That denial became the cause of her death. He also suspected that she was carrying the child of the other man. If, some day, the finger was pointed at him, where would he be?

The I.C.S. neighbour of Vir Bahadur was restless. After returning from Bahadur's bungalow, he kept pacing the lawn of his house for a long time. When he saw Mr. Bahadur taking out his car at that late hour, his suspicions were confirmed. The woman had been telling him that the master was suspicious, and very angry. He also knew that he had been sleeping with her. When he heard the shot and went there, everything seemed out of place. He was sure something had happened. The house had been washed. The floors were wet. When Bahadur returned at night after disposing of the body, he was still awake. Bahadur garaged his car and came out to find the neighbour standing before him. For a moment, he was scared : he thought he had come to kill him and he pulled out his revolver. The neighbour spoke : 'It's me! What are you doing? Do you want to kill me?' Then, in a low tone, he said : 'Couldn't sleep. Saw you coming back and thought let me go over and ask if everything was fine.'

Bahadur walked indoors without a word. For the neighbour, this was unprecedented. He quickly changed and went to the Police Captain : 'I suspect Mr. Vir Bahadur I.C.S., has killed his maid-servant. I say this as a responsible person.' The I.G. was immediately contacted. He phoned the Chief Secretary, who spoke to the Lieutenant Governor. First the servant was arrested. During interrogation, a slight pressure was enough to extract a confession.

Bade Rai managed permission to see him in the jail. As he saw him, Vir Bahadur got up but didn't lift his eyes. Bade Rai put a hand on his shoulder.

'Adversity calls on everyone, my son. There are two ways you can face it : stand up to it and dare it, or surrender to it till the storm blows over. Choose whichever way you like— each has its strong and its weak points. You can appreciate it as well as anyone. Deputy Sahib had told me to tell you to spare no expense and to make sure that the blot is removed.'

Vir Bahadur spoke in a composed tone.

'Chachaji,' he said, 'if it were a battle with the forces outside, I could've won it— by force or by money. My misfortune is that it's a battle with the forces inside me, where neither force nor money will work. Even the mightiest surrender to their conscience. Your *bahu* came to me with the same pleas, and with all her jewellery. I told her : 'I can't win this battle with jewellery, or with wealth. I may well win the court battle, but how do I cope with the defeat that rises like floodwaters every minute within me? I can win only when I myself, as the judge, issue the judgement and hand out the punishment. To do that, I need no witness, nor any lawyer. I must be everything.'

Bade Rai was quiet at first; then he spoke :

'Contest the case you still must. One does not go around displaying a deformity in one's body; one tries to cover it with one's clothes. Legal protection too is clothing of a kind. Displaying the deformity is no big deal : one can do so any time one wishes to.'

'Why not do it now? Why wait for it?'

'Unwillingness to wait is a sign of haste, my dear.'

'But it'll release the pressure on the conscience.'

'Will it release all the pressures? What about the people at home?'

'I'll pray for them.'

'Why choose prayer when cure is available? The One you address your prayers to would also like to know why you have resorted to prayer when the path of cure is still open. Is it not running away from your responsibilities to take direct recourse to prayer?'

Vir Bahadur kept quiet after this. A few minutes later, he

asked : 'How's *Bapu?*'

Bade Rai did not answer, so Vir Bahadur resumed :

'Please tell him this : I'm deeply indebted to him that he didn't come himself. My conscience would not have allowed me to face him; it'd have torn at my insides to feel that I. . . I. . . was his son.'

Bade Rai's eyes were moist. He clasped him to his chest.

'Sometimes it happens : you slip and fall into mud; it splatters you, but it doesn't mean your whole body has been defiled. You get mud on you, you try to wash it off. The warning bells ring when your fail to recognize mud for what it is, and become once with it. Your conscience is like a clean mirror. You can see very clearly the mud stains on you, and you are troubled by them. I respect you the more for it.'

I stood outside the room listening.

We had already been to see Mrs Bahadur. I was the first to go in. A shrivelled face, eyes like two wilted lotus flowers in the mudholes of a dried up pond, but still waving in the breeze. I can't say whether or not she was pleased at our visit, but the impression I got was that of a drowning man clutching at the straw. The moment she saw me, she said : 'I hear Bade Chacha is here too!'

'Yes. Outside.'

She almost sprang from her seat, eyes filled with tears.

'Why didn't you tell me? Come, let me take the dust of his feet. When things like this befall you, who wants to be seen with you?'

She came out into the front room and touched his feet, her hands holding the fore-end of her sari. Then the dam burst. Tears streamed from the eyes, sobs turned into hiccups. Bade Rai comforted her :

'You are a Rājpūt daughter, *bahu!* Fighting adversity is in your blood! You can't lose heart like this! What'll happen to the others if you do? Who's your old father-in-law going to turn to? Your husband needs your protction too!'

'But will he accept it?' She addressed it to me. Bade Rai heard it.

'That's why I am here. I am going to hire the best lawyer. We'll fight the case till the end. He may not be my son, but a friend's son is not very different.'

'Why didn't Babuji come?'

Bade Rai didn't know how to tackle that one. He fumbled a little, then said :

'A matter of prestige. You'd know these things better.'

She hemmed and said : 'My Babuji too sent word not to spare any expense, but says that he won't be able to stand beside me and be counted. Had it been any other matter. . .' and she burst into tears again. Speaking to herself, she continued : 'Had it been any other matter, why would I need support? Whatever may have happened, he still remains my husband. I stand by him in good or in bad, in glory or in sin. Others may take their prestige with them and say goodbye, but my place is by his side. Had I been worth anything, would he have looked at that shameless slut. . .?'

'Bahu, I am with you.' That was all he said :

She shifted the veil from her face a tiny bit, looked at Bade Rai and dropped her eyes.

A telegram from Arun was waiting for us on our return. He wanted money immediately. Bade Rai flew into a rage. 'Does he think we're running a mint here? This boy is clearly getting out of hand.'

Bade Rai had an English friend who had been Collector in our town and had helped us on many occasions. Bade Rai still corresponded with him. Many times he had thought of writing to him about Arun, but he never got round to it. That day he decided he must write and he plunged into it straightaway :

Dear Edward,

I have been thinking of writing to you about my youngest son, Arun, for quite some time. Every time I've held back with the thought that you people take your retirement seriously, and live it with dedication. For you, retirement is a time you've earned for relaxation after a lifetime of hard work. I didn't want to disturb the peace of your retirement by writing to you about Arun. Recently I have begun to

feel that Arun's expenses are becoming rather unmanageable. I sent him money very recently, and now I have another telegram from him asking for more. If it's not too far out of your way, would you please call on him, or find out by some other means, how things are with him? If his need for money is genuine, please arrange it to be made available to him. I shall reimburse it to you.

The truth is that we belong to a country where everything is like a closed box. Our young men, the moment they leave its shores and enter the free air of your country, cast aside their traditions and training like old snakeskin and take to your society as if they had been born to it. The plenitude in your country of everything, be it beauty, or luxuries, or money, is something that we cannot enjoy uninhibitedly, or lose ourselves completely in. If we tend to get lost in that world, like small water fish in a large ocean, it is only natural even if the plenitude is owed to our own country. If we don't appreciate our limits and try to copy your manners, what else can we expect except rack and ruin? You know well enough that wisdom doesn't cost a penny, while pleasure takes even the last one. You remember the son of Rai Bahadur Chandrika Prasad who had come to England hoping to be an I.C.S. officer some day? What happened to him is no secret to you. Even otherwise, things aren't getting any better here : the value of the rupee is going down everyday; resources are getting depleted and the political scenario is changing fast. One doesn't know what to expect and when. It's all this that has forced me to seek your help.

My regards to Mrs. Edward.

Your
Hari Rai

The letter had been written and despatched, but Bade Rai and Chhote Rai were still not at ease. The apprehension that Arun had got himself into some scrape from which he would never be

able to extricate himself weighed heavily with both the brothers. And if this did happen, what would happen to our dreams?

Another catastrophe was staring the Rai family in the face. Chhoti Chachi was sick and was getting worse everyday. Female mortality had always been high in our family. On average, men lived much longer than women. The confined quarters and the polluted environs took a heavy toll of women. They spent all their lives in their dingy and stifling quarters, breathing in the foul air, and in the end the environs extracted their price and consumed their bodies. It appears to me now that life and death have a lot to do with the environment. I am already over eighty-four and death is not far away, but my health isn't all that bades. Before my very eyes the world has been transformed. The condition of women has undergone a metamorphosis. Thinking and attitudes have changed. In my days, total defilement awaited a woman outside the doorstep of the house. Chhoti Chachi was fast losing her grip : life was slipping through her fingers like water from cupped hands, even as the frothing waters of death below rose to envelope her.

She had handed over all her jewellery, which she had preserved carefully for Arun's bride, to Chhote Rai. She had a craving to see Arun's wife before she died. She always said : 'For every woman, to see her daughter or daughter-in-law wearing her jewellery is to see herself in their images, and to feel the past re-enact itself before her eyes.' Time was running out fast. She had no time to wait.

The reply from Mr. Edward was received on the day Chhoti Chachi died. The letter bore the Delhi stamp. possibly, Mr. Edward had handed the letter to some friend of his traveling to India to post in Delhi for quicker delivery. The letter was given to me and I put it away carefully. Everyone was in mourning. Chhote Rai was lost, lonely, and looked as if someone had squeezed him totally dry. Every now and then he would break into tears, his eyes turned heavenwards like those of a child who sees his mother looking out of an upper story window and starts crying to be with her. Bade Rai too was in great grief. How many of the Rai *bahus* had

followed the *Badi Raini* into the funeral pyre! Krishna's first wife, two of Bhaskar's, and now Raghav's too! Still he tried to Console Chhote Rai : 'All of us have seen this misfortune strike us— you, me, Krishna, and even Bhaskar. Death is the best teacher of patience. You lose wealth : you work hard and get it back; you lose a person and he never comes back. That's when you need true patience. Everything else is part of the flux. Chhoti bahu stayed with us the longest. You'll meet her again. Do you think drowning yourself in this slough of inactivity you'll please her soul? Think of her happiness too. Sorrow and happiness— you must think of both, or their average will never work out.'

Chhote Rai listened patiently. Sometimes, Bade Rai took him along on his walks. Though Chhote Rai joined him, he preferred to sit at home and think thoughts of Chhoti Chachi.

I was worried about Arun. No money had been sent yet, nor had he been informed. The expense of Chhoti Chachi's funeral was an extra burden, though borne entirely by Chhote Rai. More than once, I had an urge to take out a few *athamāsīs* from the *naulī* that Deputy Sahib had left with us, and to send Arun the money. But I could never gather enough courage.

When someone raised the matter of intimating Arun of Chhoti Chachi's death, I was reminded of the letter. I read it first :

> Dear Hari Rai,
> I am not yet so old, nor so bed-ridden, that I should not be able to do a bit of babysitting for you. It's after ages that you've considered me worthy enough to do something for you, though, I remember, you used to pester me a lot in India. But that's a different story. Honestly, I sometimes wonder what you Indians take us British for. As if God cast us in a special smithy of His. We too sleep and eat and perform our duties like you do! And we also do all those filthy things that every human being does, i.e. which must necessarily be done. I spent a lot of time in India trying to tell you to desist from deifying us, and to treat us as

human beings. You people still retain some metaphysics, some spiritualism : we are absolutely innocent in that department. Purely physical and crassly materialistic— that's what we are. Dancing dum-a-dum with dames in our arms— what you hated most about us. The fact is, however, that that's exactly what your boys come here for. It's natural for man to succumb to his weaknesses.

You remember what I often told you in India? Let me equip you with a full-time mem to counter-balance all your divinity. But you never showed any inclination. You failed to heed my advice, but your son has proved smarter than you, though he's a bit new to the game yet. I have put things clearly to him, and, I'm glad to say, he has understood them. In fact, the girl wasn't serious at all. I had to bully her a little, and she took to her heels. After all, a retired I.C.S. does carry some authority, doesn't he? Apart, of course, from being a trained bully.

I have brought your son over for the time being. You needn't send any money now. I have got him an employment. He'll be working in his spare hours and earn enough to live decently. I'll of course charge him for the room and for his stay with us, simply to make him realize that these things do not come free. When a man has to spend on his comforts, he earns a right to them, though this sentiment may take time to sink in the minds of your people yet. In our country, even the Prime Minister's son is not ashamed to work as a paid employee. Only the king and his family are above this meniality. They are our only surviving symbols of a feudalistic order and we have chosen to keep them that way, To a considerable extent, we are all menials now. Certainly more than you are, anyway.

How's your brother, Krishna Rai? Does he still make life difficult for you? He's more cunning than you, and more of a fibber. Knows which side his bread is buttered. Arun remembers you. He's hit it off with the old woman, and I'm a bit worried that one day he might make off with her!

Don't you worry, however. Want to think again about that mem? Can ensure home delivery. Will make you young again! But, no, what'd you know about mems?

Mrs. Edward sends her regards. Christmas is round the corner. The shops have been done up. Come Christmas and London will be full of flowers. Like armies of ants, men and women will take to the streets. Every Christmas I think of you. What gifts you used to send! This time your son will have to make up for it.

Merry Christmas and Jai Ramji ki!

Your
Edward

I handed the letter nervously to Bade Rai. He asked when it had been received. I told him the facts. It had been received on the day of Chachi's death. I had put it away and then forgotten all about it. Bade Rai frowned but said nothing. Whenever Bade Rai didn't like something but was constrained to remain silent, his moustaches dipped. He read the letter. As he did so, his face took on different expressions. At one point, his face was clouded with pained fury, and the moustaches became askew like the uncorrected scales of a street vendor. Must have been at the point where it spoke about Arun and the white flirt. At other points, a brief smile lighted up his expression, drawing his lips in a parallel line with his expression. I was watching his expression very closely and telling myself that people who are always conscious of their position are incapable of a hearty laugh. Be it pain or laughter- – a suggestive ripple is all that shows up, and then it's gone! He read the letter a second time, and the tension eased a little. His comment was a brief one :

'Exactly, what I was dreading! Thanks to you, Edward, you saved him. You have done us a great favour by taking the boy home. a favour we'll never be able to repay.'

Suddenly, he thought of something : 'Have you read the letter?' he asked.

I was stumped. Didn't know what to say. After a moment

of confusion, I said : 'Glanced through it on the way here.'

He gave a 'H'm' and got up. 'Show it to Raghav too,' he said and, as he walked out, handed me the letter behind his receding back. I collected it.

Now I had to watch Chhote Rai reading the letter. His face was a transparent guide to the letter. The expressions changed quickly. Intermittently, a half-spoken sentence would also be heard. The first one was : 'We didn't expect this of you, Arun'; next : 'Still some good people around'; third : 'English people too can be kind'; the fourth sentence was : 'Hasn't yet lost his jocular manner, has he, our Edward Sahib?' and finally : 'The only man who can write such a letter to Bade Bhaiya!'

Then he turned to me and said : 'You were the one to insist that he must go. Escaped by the skin of his teeth. . . it was a sure disaster.'

I knew I would have to take the blame. I took it in silence. After Chachi's death, Bhavani had curtailed his visits to the women's quarters of the house. He would call out to some maid from the doorstep, and told her what he wanted. He entered the quarters only when I or the children were there. Saranga had sensed the change. Though extravagant of speech, Saranga was basically good at heart. Now I had a pretty clear picture of what had transpired that day. Inwardly, I felt ashamed in the presence of Sona and Bhavani. One was my daughter, the other a servant : admitting my mistake to either was hurtful to my feudal sentiments. Many more years had to pass before I realized that admitting your mistake, though it may not make you a nobler human being, certainly makes you a more relaxed one. Though the things Saranga had told me were untrue, she never felt obliged to admit it. Nor did I ever bring up the matter again with her. A note of formality entered our relationship.

Raghubar was fear-stricken for a long time after the incident. An unacknowledged distance now separated him from Saranga. He became the unintended victim of the event. Rani and Bhavani got the beating, but Raghubar got the scare! I had recently begun to

sense the stirrings of a rebellion in Raghubar. The children he befriended were all below him either in age or in class status. Bhavani always tried to explain things to him : 'Make friends with your equals, Bhaiya; if Bade Rai gets to know about your friends, he'l. ,be mad at you.'

Raghubar interpreted this as an attempt to cut him off from his friends, and he started asking all sorts of questions : 'What do you mean by 'equal'? What's wrong if I play with them? Why do they live in such small houses? Why do they eat sitting on the floor? and so on and so on.

Bhavani tried to answer these questions in different ways, but Raghubar pooh-poohed his answers and made fun of him. Bhavani had basically only one answer to all has questions : These are the fruits of the evil deeds they did in their past lives. Raghubar latched on the the word 'Fruits' : 'What do you mean 'fruits'?' Bananas, guavas, almonds, grapes, melons are fruits, and we have to eat them quickly. If you don't eat them quickly, they go bad. They bought so much fruit for Chhoti Dadi, but she didn't eat any, so all of it went soft and bad.' When Bhavani could answer his questions no more, he conceded defeat. Holding his own ears, he would say : 'No more, no more, Bhaiya, I'll talk to you no more. I've told you whatever I knew— but you keep going on and on.'

Raghubar would laugh heartily. He liked it when Bhavani put up a great show of displeasure.

At home, he got into arguments with Sona. Sometimes even with Saranga. It was only with me and Bade Rai that he kept his mouth shut. To be sure, he did try to obey Bade Rai, but if he saw a sharecropper being beaten up, he got out of control and became destructive. He felt as if he himself was being ill-treated. It often happened that he went to sleep without eating his dinner and refused to get up. His behaviour was becoming a serious cause of worry for me. Perhaps for others too, but, being his father, I was probably involved more directly.

He was also beginning to display a contradictory form of behaviour. Whenever an important person called on Bade Rai, he would at once change and go and sit down with the guest as if

the guest was calling on him. When the guest discovered that he was Bade Rai's grandson, he would put him on his knees, stroke him and talk to him. If the guest happened to be a Muslim, he would also shake hands with him. All this greatly pleased Raghubar and he went about boasting to his friends : 'Today I met so-and-so. So- and-so came to our house to day. . .' and so on.

Bade Rai, one day, addressed a pointed inquiry to him :

'Raghubar, why do you behave like this?'

He replied promptly : 'I want to know how big people are different from 'small' ones.'

That day Bade Rai took it light-heartedly. Then one day an old friend of his, Sir D.P., called on him. He belonged to east U.P. but was on his way to Mussoorie and decided to call on his friend on the way. Raghubar was out playing with his friends. When he learnt of the visitor, he came posthaste, changed quickly, and arrived on the scene with a friend. Bade Rai saw him but paid no attention. However, when he saw the *Chhīpī boy* in tow, it raised his hackles. Raghubar was leading his friend by the hand and was not looking at Bade Rai at all.

Sir D.P. turned to Raghubar and asked : 'So he is Bhaskar's son, is he?'

'Yes, my grandson.'

'Come, son, come here!'

Raghubar was with him like a shot.

Sir D.P. extended his hand to lift him onto his knees, but he stopped and said :

'This is my friend. Let him sit first.'

Sir D.P. looked at the child. The child was quite handsome. *Chhīpīs* are a handsome tribe anyway. And he wasn't particularly dirty either. The face however spoke his class. Sir D.P. stopped in his tracks.

Bade Rai, for the first time, took Raghubar by the ear and said :

'Go out and play. When your elders are talking, do not walk in with whoever you're with.'

The child with him was near a. Raghubar looked at the

quaking moustache of the angry Bade Rai, took the boy by the hand and walked straight out.

Bade Rai took some time to cool down. He said : 'Do forgive me, D.P.,' when he had.

'Not at all. Still a child. Seems he's very sociable already. A general trend among kids these days. Instead of befriending kids from families of their own status, they look for friends in lower class families. I talked about this phenomenon with child psychologists in England. According to them, children get fed up moving in the same circles all the time and crave a change. That's why they run to friends from a different class. Secondly, it satisfies their ego. Third, friends from lower classes pay them more attention, admire everything they have, and do not challenge their ego by saying 'I too have it.' But the most dangerous and worrying aspect of it all is that if this trend is allowed to grow, the distinction between high and low will disappear. The whole world will be Gandhiized. I hear Russia already has a system like this— everyone there is equal. But can everyone ever be equal?'

Bade Rai did not react. He was replaying the same scene in his mind.

Sir D.P. changed the topic and moved on to Vir Bahadur.

'Though he was a personal friend of mine, I must say he's given the ICS a bad name, ICS, the finest civil service in the world!'

'You are right,' said Bade Rai, nodding his head.

'I hear you are arguing his case.'

'Yes, so I am. His father is an old friend. A very reputable man.'

'You're risking your reputation!'

'May be. But now I'm committed.'

'You think he may be acquitted?'

'Can't say. We can only try. The English are known to be just and fair.'

'Till the balance of justice tilts to one side one doesn't know who won and who lost. The verdict may favour Vir Bahadur, or it may not.'

'A verdict in his favour is no more than a flight of the imagination.'

'Possibly, but not something that we can settle by debate,' And he dropped the topic.

While leaving, Sir D.P. sent for Raghubar. Raghubar was angry and was nowhere to be found. He didn't come. Bade Rai was offended as he felt Raghubar had kept away deliberately. Sir. D.P. left without seeing him. Bade Rai couldn't help feeling insulted in his own house by his own grandson.

Ranjan, Majhhale Rai's son, already sported a downy moustache. He had stepped into, or was stepping into, youth. His friends were mostly police inspectors, whom he emulated by moving around with Majhhale Rai's revolver in a leather belt slung on his shoulder. The belt also housed cartridges in a row, though they were blanks. People laughed at him. He had a tendency towards obesity, and boys called him Fattie. Studies were anathema to him. He repeated each class at least twice. Whenever he failed an exam, the parents were unhappy but, a darling son as he was, everything was soon forgiven and forgotten. This encouraged him to go around talking big about himself.

He would return to regale Majhhali Chachi with fresh yarns everyday. Chachi, credulous, fell for everything he said, and as he said it. He had a friend called Sitaram who supposedly did one better on Ranjan by spending three years in the same class. Whenever Majhhale Rai pulled up Ranjan for his shady companions, he started entertaining his mother with stories of the Sitaram family. There was one character in that family in the invention of which Ranjan had displayed special ingenuity. This character was called Kunwar. This Kunwar was supposed to be Sitaram's elder brother. He was a Police Captain somewhere in Rajasthan. His wife, it seemed, was a modern and educated lady. His car was a Studebaker. The car was making a name for itself in those days. Its special characteristic was that its front and back looked identical, so you could never tell whether it was coming or going. This car was mostly driven by the wife. They often drove the Studebaker all the way

from Rajasthan. Sitaram's brother and his wife supposedly held Ranjan in great esteem. Being a scion of a zamindar family, Ranjan specially venerated the officer class. Congressmen, on the other hand, called it 'the slavish mentality.' A quarter of a century has passed since independence; two prime ministers have left for their respective heavenly abodes, but this 'slavish mentality' shows no signs of decline. During the reign of the lady prime minister it actually broke all records. I now feel that in those days we had more self-respect. Why, even Bade Rai picked up fights with his English bosses! But all these comparisoons have no meaning now, I guess!

I was talking about that character— creation of Ranjan which he used as his armour. Whenever the topic of discussion was studies, he arranged to manipulate the discussion in such a way that everyone found himself/herself discussing the so-designated brother of Sitaram with the name of Kunwar. He made a specific mention of the fact that this same Kunwar had been telling him not to worry too much about the exams since he was going to get him nominated as a Police Inspector. This was enough to allay all the nagging fears of the doting parents. Majhhale Chacha was particularly keen on a career for Ranjan which would keep the much vaunted *haveliwallahs* in awe of him. He was also gratified to note that Ranjan was following in the footsteps of his *Tau* by building up good relations with high officers. Majhhali Chachi gave another colour to it. She told the womenfolk tall tales of her son's exploits : Ranjan has no time, you know. He is busy all the time with the highest ranking officers, being a son, after all, of a high ranking officer himself. His father was no mean officer. The man who ill-treated him had to face the wrath of God– let me tell you that. The chap was an ICS. He was nasty to my husband— and see what happened to him! Is rotting in jail on the charge of murder. Shot the very maid servant she was carrying on with. And our Bade Rai is defending him! When it was the question of his own brother, he pretended to be dumb. . .'

The women were particularly unsparing. You can't beat women when the premium is on cunning. When they wanted to

be mean to Majhhali Chachi, they would look at each other meaningfully and give each other smiles. Someone would probably also let loose a suitable remark; 'But, of course, parentage, company ... these are what build character, don't they ?'

Another woman would fly another kite :

'A handsome face he has got, your Ranjan. Always reminds me of that widow, the one who worked as the cook, you know. Must have been quite a beauty in her young days. Looks so much like Ranjan.'

The remark sent a current through Majhhali Chachi's body. She would start fuming. More than once she had turned that cook out of the house. When Ranjan was still small, she'd insist on looking after him : 'Let me take care of him, Bahuji,' he'd say, 'He bothers you so much.' At first, Chachi let her have him rather innocently, but one day she caught her with the child at her breast. It drove her mad for whatever reason, and she kicked out the cook. The cook was very contrite and importunate, but Chachi didn't relent. This incident was known to many people.

Chachi did try to meet the onslaught. 'They say God gives two people, and only two, the same face in the world.' The women would laugh : 'God may have favoured you with His secrets, but we only know what we see.'

Majhhali Chachi made herself scarce at this point, or let them have it too.

At school, Ranjan had to bear the same sort of attacks. Often when he was in the middle of one of his bluster sessions, or was engaging another boy physically, someone would let out the cry of 'Mr. Found !'

That always pulled Ranjan up short, as if tripped by someone in a race. A few times he even went to his mother hurt, and cried on her shoulders.

A couple of those Police Inspectors of Ranjan were virtual Tarzans. Ranjan's repertoire contained many stories about them alongside stories of Kunwar, the Police Captain. All these stories were intended for his mother, his best audience. While telling the stories

to her, Ranjan too glowed with happiness. There was a Police Inspector called Inspector Digamber Singh. The veracity of this claim is hard to establish, but that was irrelevant for Ranjan. One day Inspector Digamber Singh and Inspector Malik took a wager. The issue was to upturn a standing ass in one kick. The winner would get two hundred rupees from the loser. Both the Police Inspectors lived in the Police Club. Ranjan claimed that upturning a standing ass in one kick is a very tough job. It was Malik's turn first. The ass brayed and moved himself majestically to another spot. Actually it was a jenny-ass. Digamber Singh kicked next and overturned the jenny. Not only did she overturn, she also started bleeding from the rear and producing gurgling sounds. She was carrying an ass's baby in her womb.

'If it was a jenny, it has to be an ass's baby,' Majhhali Chachi clarified.

Ranjan didn't like being interrupted. Chachi sensed his displeasure and quickly resumed her expectant posture.

'What happened next ?'

'Next ? Why, he got his two hundred rupees.'

'No. I mean to the jenny.'

'The jenny ? How'd I know ? Was I following her about ? Must have died.'

Whenever snubbed in this way, Chachi fell silent. Sometimes, she tried to talk sense into his head : 'Ranjan, my son. I'm so worried about you. When'll you make good ? Why don't you study ?'

Ranjan would do a somersault back to Kunwar.

'Kunwar Bhai and bhabhi are in town. Last evening, they ordered three horses from the Police Lines for a riding session. They insisted that I go with them. Told me I'd have to learn to ride if I wanted to become a Police Inspector.' But I was afraid for you, only for you, and didn't go. Kunwar Bhai insisted a lot. Then they left. The sāīs took the third horse.'

After a while, he said :

'I hear Tauji was a great rider too.'

Since Majhhali Chachi said nothing, he continued :

'Kunwar's sāīs was telling me that he'd seen many big British

officers riding, but no one could beat Captain Sahib and his Mem Sahib. On their way back, they'd to cross the Kali river. The bridge was overcrowded. The husband and wife took a bet : they'd jump the horse across the river. Mem Sahib spurred the horse and, Whoosh!' she was across in one jump. Then the Sahib took the jump. Cross he did too, but the horse twisted his leg as he hit the ground, and fell. So did the Sahib.'

Majhhali Chachi was sorry at this denouement. She cluck-clucked in sympathy.

'What a pity ! Such a big Police Captain falls down and his wife jumps across so merrily ! What a pity ! What the hell did she want to jump across so safely for ? To do her husband down? What a pity ! Couldn't she have fallen herself ? If a man loses his respect, can a woman keep hers? What a pity!'

Ranjan was pleased to note that his words commannded total belief. He never took his tales to Majhhale Chacha, for he tended to put him down very promptly : 'Is that all you can do – cooking up stories? No studies? What do you think you're going to do in life ? Become a street entertainer?'

Majhhali Chachi sprang to his defence :

'Don't dampen his spirits ! Don't you see how full of life he is?'

That made Majhhale Chacha madder. Ranjan would keep quiet, but his heart would be cursing Majhhale Rai. 'Takes advantage of his age. Let me grow up, I'll show him!' When he had been given a stronger dose, he would go even further : 'Why doesn't he die, the old man ? Always growling at me !' Then he cooled down and his thoughts took another turn : 'What's this I'm thinking ? If he dies, Tau will throw me out, and Raghubar will inherit everything.' Then he would mentally go down on his knees to God and with folded hands pray to be forgiven : 'Never again, I promise, never again will I let such thoughts enter my mind.' And once again he would feel himself surrounded by all those who shouted 'Mr. Found' at him.

To keep his cartridge belt full, Ranjan now used to cultivate the

friendship of police inspectors. Though Majhhale Rai had a licensed revolver as well as cartridges, he kept them under lock and key. As a result, Ranjan had to depend on police inspectors for the supply of even a few cartridges.

On one occasion this pursuit led Ranjan to try his tricks on a wrong police inspector and as a result he ended up with a few stitches. Majhhale Rai was enraged, and took him in the same state to the Police Captain. The Captain suspended the inspector but also told Majhhale Rai to warn his son not to keep the company of police inspectors. In their job, it's natural for them to get brutalized, he said. And take away his cartridge belt too ! You have been a tehsildar yourself, and are aware of the legal im plications. It's a crime to use firearms and ammunition to produce false terror in people, he said. So the belt was off, and he was warned to keep off police personnel.

After that Ranjan didn't stir out of the house for many days. Majhhali Chachi never quite found out how he had received those wounds !

Raghubar too was now consorting with Ranjan. Ranjan was the older of the two and at school Raghubar felt secure under his protection. In those days, games and sports were arranged by the schools, and often Raghubar returned home in the evenings directly from the playfield with Ranjan. No one knew about this at first. Raghubar also spent a lot of time outside the haveli. He continued to keep the same company he had been forbidden to and had also invited a couple of more warnings since the last time. His impudence was increasing day by day. Everybody in the house took special precautions to see that reports of his behaviour did not reach Bade Rai. But whatever few reports trickled to him were enough to upset him. He was getting convinced that his only grandson was getting out of hand. It was his constant endeavour to keep him under his own supervision, or under the supervision of some responsible person in the family. A servant boy had also been hired to stay with him all the time, but he was turning into another one of Raghubar's buddies. Raghubar never left home on his day-to-day

outings without him.

When Bhavani noted, on more occasion than one, that the two were disporting themselves as friends – running and laughing and joking together – it raised his hackles. He couldn't, of course, say anything to Raghubar, but he gave the boy a thrashing and sent him on his way. Raghubar sulked for many days, and Bhavani had to work extra hard to regain his favour. We were all agreed that Ranjan was a spoilt lad, and the latest incident with the police inspector had confirmed our worst suspicions. Everybody could now take a pious as-you-sow-so-you-reap sort of attitude : you adopt an orphan and you take the consequences. God knows whose seed he was ! There was a strong rumour that he was a widow's son, and if it was the same widow who looked so much like him, then where was the question of his being of a gentle lineage?

When it came to our knowledge that Raghubar too had started consorting with Ranjan, we were alarmed. Would Raghubar too go the Ranjan way? Would he also fall a victim to the gang of boy-lifters, a male version of the better-known girl-lifting gangs? There were many such gangs in operation then, their *modus operandi* being to encourage the boys to get into bad habits at a raw age before trapping them for life.

When we got to know about it, Chhote Rai took the lead in talking to Raghubar. I followed with some sharp admonitory words and a few slaps. Then one day he challenged me frontally with a direct question : What's so wrong with Ranjan Chacha that I can't play with him?

I tried sweet reasoning : 'He keeps bad company. His habits are bad. He'll force you into evil ways.'

'Who's bad company?'

'You don't know them.'

'Do you?'

'What do you mean?'

'How do you know whose company Ranjan Chacha keeps? You have no contact with him. Anyone I go with seems to be bad company to you.,'

'Why don't you stay with your own friends?'

'How can I?'

'Why?'

'You say they are all lower-class and mean. Ranjan Chacha gives me his protection at school. It's because of him that no one dares to touch me.'

'I'll talk to your teacher. He'll protect you.'

'The teacher can protect me in the class. But the boys are with me all the time.'

His arguments were endless. I was beginning to despair. In sheer rage I blurted out :

'It's such company that has made you what you are. All the bad habits! You're going to fall sick if you don't give up this company.'

I don't know where he had picked it up but he promptly retorted :

'At school you too ...'

I gave him a ringing slap. It broke off the sentence and sent his head crashing against the chair. For the first time I had hit him so hard. The press of my fingers stood out on his cheek and his eyes filled up with tears. But he didn't let a single tear drop. He kept staring at me as if unbelieving that I had actually hit him. But he knew that the truth was that I had hit him. He was face to face with his helplessness. I guess it is this realization of one's impotence that gives rise to impudence. I too immediately regretted what I had done. His relations with Saranga were already strained, now he would distance himself from me too. This would only increase his helplessness. I softened my tone and said soothingly:

'Should you say such things about your father?'

He was quick to respond : 'And about your son?' Then he burst into tears and could speak no more. He had been grievously hurt. I watched him cry, and I felt I was like a sparrow whose chick was trapped in a thorny bush, and who had no clue how to rescue it.

Give up Ranjan's company, however, he did not. In fact, Ranjan now became his regular companion, almost a guide. Cricket had not yet come into fashion and was played mostly in English

schools. That day a cricket match was taking place in the school. Raghubar went off to see it. Though he did tell us that he was going, no one thought he would be away for the whole day. This was his first long absence from home. As he watched the match, he kept thinking of home, and an occasional shiver of fear ran through him. Even Ranjan told him to go home. They would be worried about you, he said. But he saw so many children there who were watching the game without a care in the world. Whenever he thought of going home, he thought of their homes and their people. Why don't they get worried? And he continued to watch the game.

In the meantime, Bade Rai had made several inquiries about Raghubar. Everyone tried to fudge the issue. Being a holiday, one couldn't say he was at school. When the fifth or the sixth inquiry came, we had to tell him that he was at the cricket match. When Bade Rai learnt that he had missed lunch too, he was furious. He himself refused lunch, and that meant nobody had lunch that day. Our old maid, Imarti, somehow persuaded Saranga to eat. She was expecting Girwar. Girwar is my second son. I mean Saranga's son. In the first month Saranga was very ill, and had to under go a prolonged treatment. She even had to undergo a small operation at the same European hospital where Kala had died. At first she was adamant she wouldn't go to that hospital, but she did come round eventually. She was not permitted to miss any meals.

It was evening and Raghubar wasn't back yet. It was time for Bade Rai to go to his club. He decided to walk and left word at home that as soon as Raghubar was back, the coach should fetch him from the club. Everyone knew that something was going to happen that day which had never happened before.

We had to traverse a lane to get to the main road. As he entered the main road, he saw Raghubar trudging back with Ranjan. His anger was at such a pitch that the moment he saw Raghubar he saw red. He lifted his cane and brought it down with full force on Raghubar's back. It was as if a sudden dam had sprung in the middle of the road : people on either side stopped dead in their tracks. For one thing, no one had ever seen Bade Rai walk the

street like a commoner; for another he was belabouring his own grandson in a public highway. Astonished and terrified, everyone stood rooted to their spots; no one dared to stop him. Immediately, he turned on his heels and asked Raghubar to precede him. To Ranjan he only said 'Tell Krishna I want to see him.' Ranjan too was terrified. Once in the lane, Bade Rai brought down his cane once again. His jaw had tightened like an iron vice, and his eyes *spewed fire.* All his upper-class decency lay in tatters.

Raghubar's body was racked with waves of pain as if he had been bitten by a poisonous insect. He kept looking back at Bade Rai and walking ahead. He was thinking of Rafiq, a chaprassi in his school. Rafiq's son, Rahman, was a thief. Not a burglar-thief actually, but a fruit-filcher. He would climb up the fruit trees in the school grounds and pluck fruits, which he first ate himself and then gave to other children. His father had a monthly salary of twelve rupees. There were ten members in the family. Rahman was often hungry and stealing fruit was his only way of allaying his hunger. As a result he had earned the sobriquet of Rahman the Thief. If anyone tried to dissuade him from his thievery, he would start obfuscating. : 'After all, what are fruits for ? The trees are not going to eat their own fruits, are they ? Do we eat our own shit?' And he went into such graphic details that children were nauseated. He was a pastmaster in this art. Then he would shake the tree. 'My sister tells me no one likes his own shit, but everyone likes the other's. So if I like the shit of the trees, why does the gardener feel so jealous ?' The gardener he referred to had thrashed him on several occasions. Once or twice, he had even been reported to the Vice-Principal, who had warned Rafiq and threatened him with dismissal. The story was repeated that day. The Vice-Principal called him and told him that his son was being dismissed from school and he from his job, since they were both thieves. The loss of the job was a disaster for Rafiq, but even worse was being declared a thief. So Rafiq started hitting the boy. Right and left. Left and right. He grabbed whatever he could lay his hands on and started hitting him with it. Finally, he picked up an axe, and that was when the Vice-Principal stopped him : 'Are hou mad... ?'

With folded hands, he said : 'Huzūr, thievery is a sin with us. And because of this fellow I have been called a thief. I'll sacrifice this fellow and wipe off the blot of dishonesty from my name.' Finally, the Principal had to intervence and arrange a compromise.

The only difference from Rafiq in the present case was that Bade Rai was not opening his mouth. Instead, he had clenched his teeth so hard that there was a danger of their turning into fine powder. Rafiq, on the other hand, accompanied his thrashing with verbal bashing. His thrashing was an open, uninhibited affair, whereas Bade Rai's thrashing had an upper-class reserve and refinement. Everyone in the house was stunned to see Bade Rai, his cane lifted in the air, entering the haveli gate, preceded by Raghubar. Everyone knew the unimaginable was going to happen this day. Rahmatullah flashed in my mind : he was the only one who could bring to a stop a horse gone wild. Had he been present, he would have stepped between them and said : 'Kill me if you will, but, for God's sake, let the boy go !' He could have even grabbed his cane. All his life, Rahmatullah never asked for, nor accepted, a penny from Bade Rai, so he never felt small before him. Even Chhote Rai was cowering. Once in his room, Bade Rai went into him in all seriousness. And the reserve was also lifted:

'Going around with that loafer Ranjan, who doesn't know what's right and what's wrong. Tell me what it is you want. Tell me the truth! Where were you all day?' The mask of decency and decorum finally lay shattered.

He suspected that Raghubar was using the cricket match as an excuse and that, in reality, he was somewhere else, but the phraseology he used shocked everyone. He had actually unmasked himself completely. Raghubar, on the other hand, had hardened himself into a rock. He didn't even ask for forgiveness, or promise not to repeat the error. Bade Rai simply would not stop. No one had ever seen him thrash anyone, not even a bonded slave, so mercilessly. Despite all the trouble I had created for him, he had never so much as touched me. Not when I drove my gig into the Collector's mem's coach, not when I knifed a boy in school, not when he first discovered that I was a regular visitor to Kishen

Babu's ! And Raghubar was his darling ! Even if he got a false whisper that I or Saranga had taken Raghubar to task for something, he would immediately call out to Bhavani to go and find out why Raghubar was crying. Had anyone said anything to hurt him? But that day he was raving mad; not just mad, bloodthirsty! It had everyone guessing what could possibly have happened to him. Was it some devil's wind that was blowing through him? Why was he so mad? And that too with a small kid? The father in me, weighed down by the son in me, was already beginning to stir.

Saranga was in the haveli. When Sona went crying to her and she knew that Bade Rai was hell-bent on finishing Raghubar, she rushed out of her quarters, out of the haveli, and dashed into Bade Rai's room. It was the first time ever that a *bahu* of the family, throwing all tradition to the winds, had entered the male quarters of the house – not just the male quarters, but its bastion : Bade Rai's own room. The place was forbidden to her – when Bade Rai was himself in it.

She went and wrapped herself around Raghubar. Bade Rai's uplifted hand hung in the air.

He roared : 'Move away, *Bahu*. How dare you step out of the *zenana?*'

Saranga stood in the middle of the room clutching Raghubar to her. Bhavani stood sobbing with the other servants to one side. She told him : 'Bhaiya, take Raghubar inside.'

'He can't go!' Bade Rai roared again.

She flopped onto the floor and covered Raghubar with the end of her sari. Bade Rai addressed himself to me :

'Ask *Bahu* to remove herself inside the house at once. Or, by God, the heavens will fall today!'

She simply shook her head from inside the veil. Chhote Rai, who stood sniffing quietly in a corner, now came forward :

'Bade Bhaiya, what's come over you? Why are you bent on killing the only hope of your family, the only child who'll carry your name forward ? How long can one remain a silent spectator? *Bahu* doesn't mean to flout commands, or to break the tradition,

but she sees in Raghubar the future of her own child to come. Do stop now. Ranjan too is a branch of this family, brother to Bhaskar and Arun. You brought Bhaskar back from the path of ruin, you arranged Arun to be returned to the straight path in far away England. Can't we do the same to him? We can, and it is our duty that we do. It's not enough to hate him.'

Bade Rai stomped out of the room. Raghubar received a fit of convulsion, then fell down unconscious.

We kept an all night vigil that day. Of course, no one had his dinner. Raghubar had recovered after a while. His injury was psychological. The unimaginable had happened–Bade Rai, his defence, his shield, had turned on him!

Bade Rai walked out of the room and went straight on to his club. He didn't even pause to find out how Raghubar was.

He was a very fine bridge player, rarely, if ever, accepting defeat. Everyone was keen to partner him. But that day he lost one game after another. After the third game, he got up. Mr. Afzal, SP, who was a good friend of his, followed him out and inquired: 'You're not your usual self, Rai Sahib ! I know you're one of those players who'll play to lose and still win ! So what happened today? I have heard that you once wanted to lose to the Lieutenant Governor's wife, and yet victory leapt out at you from the jaws of defeat.'

Any other time, any retailer of that tale would have filled Bade Rai's chest with pride and joy, and could have received any favour he asked for. These were the priceless memories of Bade Rai's glorious past, and his dreams for the future too. A simple reference to those events would knock his memory-can over, spilling the milk of his memories onto the surface of his mind, where it spread in an ever-widening circle. But, on that day, not even a smile escaped his lips, not a single memory-door was unlocked. He only said in a withered voice :

'I'm feeling guilty. I was mad and beat up my grandson so mercilessly —'

Mr. Afzal too was from a zamindar family. He smiled and said :

'What's this I'm hearing? You're grieving over a beating? But you should be immune to these exercises : aren't they carried on all the time in zamindar's houses and at our police stations ? I admit it's different when it is one of your own family. If decent people like you also take to this exercise ...' He did not complete the sentence but the expression on his face did : '... we policemen would be out of jobs.'

What he said didn't penetrate into Bade Rai's mind at all, and he carried on on his own :

'The ruling-class mentality has taken such deep roots in us that we have begun to treat our own children as subjects. The lordly attitude which was reserved for others is now seeking victims among our own innocent kids. When Aurangzeb arrested Shahjahan and slaughtered his own brothers, perhaps he was also crazed by the same desire for unquestioning obedience that was riding me today.'

Mr. Afzal was staring at him : 'What's that you're saying ! Do you mean to say that our children are our subordinates ? No, perhaps not. If we punish them, it's because we wish them well.'

'No I feel ... I'm sure I felt my authority challenged by his going away to see the match without my permission ... otherwise ... would I ... would anyone inflict such dire punishment on one so young?'

'Can't we look upon it as a result of taking our responsibilities seriously?'

'No. You won't understand. Here's a child who has lost his mother. He looks to me for comfort and security. And I unleash terror on him. Who saves him? The very person whom he shuns! All I have tried to do, I think, is to test my beastly power on him!

'Maybe you're right. I must think afresh on this issue. We policemen are anyway a dense lot, quite unused to serious thinking on issues of this kind.'

Bade Rai came out and got into the coach.

He was still very agitated when he reached home. Raghubar had gone to sleep in his usual place in Bade Rai's room. They had all

been with him till a little while ago. Bhavani still sat by his bed, dozing. It was actually Bhavani who had prevailed upon me and Chhote Rai to retire to our rooms for the night. Both of us lay awake in our beds, thinking. We both knew when his coach entered the compound; he walked into the house, the twang of his cane every bit as smart and devoid of any concession to the happening of the day. For a moment, I thought I would go and show myself, but I was apprehensive. He might still be in a rage. He went into his room. Bhavani jumped to a standing position.

Bade Rai went into his dressing room to change. This was an exclusively private room; you could even call it his secret quarters, for here was the famed safe with the Rai treasure in it. And of course there were priceless clothing and documents of great value.

Bhavani waited till he came out. He was now wearing his night clothes. Bhavani asked 'Dinner?'

'No, I'm not hungry. Has Raghubar eaten?'

'Yes,' said Bhavani, though it was not true. He said it so Bade Rai would not decide to go hungry too. Bade Rai gave a sigh of relief. Actually, there had been no lunch either.

He asked after a while :

'Raghubar ... Was he angry ? Did he say anything?'

'No.'

'O.K. You go and have your dinner. And go to bed.'

He waited for a few minutes, but couldn't muster courage enough to speak. I also couldn't wait, so I got up and walked downstairs. Bhavani was there too. I asked him :

'Is he still fuming?'

'He's gone to bed.'

'Dinner?'

'Doesn't want it.'

'Why?'

'He didn't say anything. He only told me to go have my dinner and go to bed.'

He went away. I went towards Bade Rai's room. A lamp was burning. A bare slab of light fell out of the door. I peeped inside.

He sat beside his pillow, tears rolling down his cheeks. He was muttering; 'Forgive me, my son !' Lots of goodies lay scattered on his bed : he must have bought them on his way back from the club.

It was the first ever occasion in my life that I had seen Bade Rai shed tears for someone.

I didn't have the heart to disturb a private dialogue though one of them was my father and the other my son !

For generations, Bade Rai had been the Chairman of the Ramlila Committee. Ramlila was held on our grounds and all the expenses were also met by us. It was more of a social obligation than a religious one. Meeting people, getting to know them, learning from them – all this was as important as the religious merit that you earned. Costumes, curtains and other paraphernalia of the Ramlila from the oldest days still lay dumped in one of the lumber rooms, but most had turned into dust. Even after Independence, the Ramlila expenses continued to be met by us for several years. But prices kept rising, the zamindari kept declining and, progressively, meeting the Ramlila expenses became more and more difficult. Bade Rai called all the concerned persons and gave them advance warning that with the changing times and the declining income it would be difficult to shoulder the Ramlila expenses for more than three or four years. The Committee therefore must start thinking about alternative arrangements for financing the Lila, or it might become difficult to stage one. People would also object to paying high subscriptions all of a sudden; hence they must introduce some subscription right away. This foresightedness had the desired results. The Ramlila Committee was able to build up its finances in the four years of notice. In fact, it was in such a comfortable position that it had been able to build permanent sites for *Lanka, Ayodhya, Ashok Vatika, Kishkindha*, etc. at the place where the *Jungle Lila* usually took place. A permanent site for the Ramlila had been allotted by the Collector on the recommendation of Bade Rai, and the Committee had taken possession of it. Eventually when we stopped financing the Ramlila, the Committee did not feel any

difficulty – moneywise or placewise. Never was a transition from a private enterprise to a public one effected with greater ease.

That year Bade Rai refused the Chairmanship of the Committee. A lot of pressure was mounted, but his No stayed a No till the end. Then Chhote Rai was approached. He too declined, but Majhhale Rai was keen and this presented the Committee with a dilemma. The Rai family had been financing the Ramlila for almost a century, but Majhhale Rai had adopted a child of an unknown caste and of unknown parentage. No one knew whether he was a legitimate child at all. For the Lila organisers, the issue of associating with a holy function like the Ramlila a person who had flouted the tenets of religion was a tough one, somewhat like a piece of bone stuck in the throat. Only one member of the Committee supported Majhhale Rai. His argument was that a man who was generous and kind enough to shower his love on an orphan, to shelter him, to make him his own son – such a man did not need any certificate from the self-appointed champions of religion. But no one listened to him and he came a cropper. He finally resigned from the Committee. Bade Rai didn't want Majhhale Rai to succeed him either. He had still not overcome his annoyance with Majhhale Rai for having ignored his message, sent through Ranjan, to see him immediately that day. If Bade Rai wanted, Majhhale Rai could still have been elected Chairman since the Committee was insistent that the Chairman should be from the Rai family. Chhote Rai too had broached the subject with Bade Rai and had suggested that if only Bade Rai would propose the name of Majhhale Rai. . . Bade Rai had cut him short : 'Look, Raghav. I'll have nothing to do with it. I'll neither propose nor oppose his name. If you're keen, you can talk to the Committee members.' The meaning was clear. Chhote Rai did not bring up the topic again.

The net result of all this was that finally I was roped in. That made things between us and Majhhale Rai worse. Now he thought that I was a party to the whole business. But, as God is my witness, I was quite innocent. I continued to be the Chairman for several years after Bade Rai.

I knew that Kishen Babu was the Ramlila organiser in his own town and that he had some excellent artistes. He had the Ramlila written and staged in the local dialect. When I put this proposal before the Committee, they revolted. The Ramlila, they said, must be performed as it always has been – based on the *Rāmcharitmānas.* That was and is the only permanent and sacred book. How can you compare a rhymester in a local lingo with Sant Tulsidas ? Kishen Babu had once recited his Ramlila to me. The rhythm, the beats, the singing style – everything was so captivating that I was lost in it completely. That was when Rahmatullah was still living. During the Ramlila season, Kishen Babu always got Rahmatullah over to his place. When Rahmatullah sang, his voice tugged at your heart-strings, and you wished that he would never stop. On the day of the crowning of Ram, he would dress up in the magnificent costumes of the bards, and, fully equipped with rings round his wrist and a stick to play them with, he sang the Ram Stuti :

Rām Ramā ramnam shamanam
Bhāv tap bhayākul pāhi janam.

The two of them – Rahmatullah and Kishen Babu – sang the Stuti together; any vocables that were hard to pronounce were taken up by Kishen Babu. Once, when I was Chairman, I too had called the pair for the Stuti. Rahmatullah was scared that his being a Muslim might create a problem. If Majhhale Rai could be barred from the Chairmanship for so simple a reason, how could they tolerate a Muslim ? Hence the fact of his being a Muslim was kept a secret. I had taken the entire responsibilty for the Stuti myself.

On the day of the Crowning, the two were done up as *kinnars* or bhils, so no one could recognize them. We let it be known that they had been specially invited from Rajasthan. There was of course no Rajasthan then, only a motley of princely states. When Rahmatullah sang the alap and struck at his rings, the audience was transported. A shower of medals and money started. It was a custom then to give silver medals and money as prizes to performers. Mukunda Halwai was also an excellent Stutist, but Rahmatullah had scored over him. I continued as Chairman of the Ramlila Committee for many more years, but never was the

Rahmatullah magic captured again.

Rahmatullah did not sing again, and couldn't have, even if invited. He wasn't there to receive the invitation. Later people did get to know about his Stuti-singing, but by then things had changed a lot. There was a new Chairman. And courtesans had already started performing on the Ramlila stage.

Some events that took place them trace an accidental connection to me, viz. the Ramlila connection. There was a lot of work there. The biggest responsibility was the collection of funds. So long as Bade Rai was Chairman, the need for a collection didn't arise. People were free to contribute or not. Since Bade Rai got the practice of collection started during his stewardship, people usually made contributions voluntarily. Each household contributed two to five rupees. Almost all the collection actually went into a fixed deposit. The second major responsibility was that of the *Swarups* (or Sarups, lit. 'the beauties'; the term refers to the actors playing the role of the gods viz. Ram, Lakshman and Sita). And then there were the processions to be arranged. Though I did not have to make the arrangements myself, it was my constant effort to keep an eye on every detail. The Ramlila Committee met in our English Guest House. Bade Rai joined us only for the Dusshera, Ram's Wedding, Ram's Exile, etc. If occasionally a problem arose with the administration, he helped us out by talking to the authorities.

The Sarups were always from Brahmin families, and were never more than fourteen or fifteen years of age. As they grew older they were shifted to other roles, probably because facial hair begins to show after that age, and this interferes with the forever-young image of Lord Ram. The pictures do show hair, but never the beard. The Ramlila people were of the view that upto the age of fourteen or fifteen children are still innocent, and the gods find it easy to inhabit them. Be that as it may, there was a boy who had been doing the role of Ram for two or three years, and had crossed the stipulated age for a Sarup. So he was given another role. Last year's Lakshman was the new Ram. Sita was the new Lakshman. Bharat and Shatrughna remained unchanged. A new Sita

had to be selected. Sita too was selected from among the boys. The practice actually continues today. Not Sita alone but all the female roles are taken by men. It may be Mandodari, or Kaikeyi. Well-to-do families usually do not look favourably upon their kids doing Sarups and try to avoid it. Needy families, on the other hand, welcome it as it means a fair amount of money. In those days of low prices, the Sarups made around three to four hundred rupees each. In addition, there were dresses and the offerings made by a devout public. But the children had to fast all day and received only one meal in the evening. They were, of course, allowed, and indeed given, fruit, milk, curds, sweets, dry fruit, etc. In the evening puri, kachauri and khir were served to the gods and then distributed to the devotes. They also had a right to the dishes they were served the food in. The younger among the Sarups would start crying for food, and had to be coaxed and cajoled with milk and fruit. Moreover, they had to observe a strict regimen : sleep on the floor, wash and clean your dishes youself, no home visits, baths twice a day, *bhog* (food served to gods) in privacy, strict self-control and pious living. The Secretary himself looked after the Sarups. Sometimes the parents of the Sarups also spent the night with them to keep them from getting upset.

The boy who finally got Sita's role was a cute little thing. The deal was struck for five hundred rupees. His mother was a widow. Her conditions were that she would stay with her son and eat her meals too with him. The Secretary conceded all her demands. In *Rāmcharitamānas*, Tulsidas has put very few dialogues in Sita's mouth; most of the speaking is done by Ram. But that boy garbled even those few sentences. His other weakness was food. At the slightest twinge of hunger, he started howling. The mother joined him. Sometimes she even fed him on the sly. The pandits in attendance were very much annoyed : this wretched woman is violating the sanctity of the Ramlila out of her fondness for her son. In the absence of the requisite discipline and devotion, the boy is surely going to be denied the divine grace due to be bestowed on him as Sita ! On such occasions, I thought it best to keep quiet, partly because I didn't quite grasp these divine matters. Later I did

begin to see some light when I saw that the spectators at the Lila would laugh uproariously at the howlers of the other actors, but a Sarup could garble away to glory, even gobble up his or her whole dialogue, but they wouldn't utter a cheep. They were concerned with their benevolent and benedictory manifestations, not with their acting ability.

On the day of the *Dhanush-bhang* ('Breaking the Bow'), there was the Lakshman-Parashuram exchange and Sita's first meeting with Ram in the *Pushp-Vatika* (Flower Garden). Sita was terribly sleepy. When he was pushed on to the stage, he first gave a big yawn. Then he spoke a couple of sentences, and was soon groping for words. Despite the prompting, all he could do was to babble incoherently. Children in the audience began to laugh, but were promptly admonished by their mothers : 'Don't laugh. This is Sita Mata. It's a sin to laugh at her. Look at her beauty. Only Mata can grant anyone such beauty.' And soon everyone was shouting 'Sitā Mātā Kī Jai.' (Hail! Mother Sita!)

Something else took place the same night. Ram and Lakshman came to blows over the right to sleep next to Sita. Sita was terrified and was crying loudly. His mother had to go home that night on some urgent business. When the people who were sleeping downstairs heard the ruckus, they ran upstairs and were dumbfounded to see the sight. The two were grappling while Sita howled. Bharat and Shatrughna, both very small kids, were crouching in a corner. One of them was Ram's brother, the other Lakshman's. Sita's clothes were torn.

Since our haveli was close by, a watchman came running to me. Possibly this was not the first time such an incident had taken place, but who would have dared to run to Bade Rai for a matter like this? Things were different now, and I was no Hari Rai. I had to go. When they saw me, all the five started bawling in unison. I was mad and on the point of taking two swipes each at the boys playing Ram and Lakshman and throwing them out of the Ramlila, when I remembered that they were no ordinary mortals : they were Sarups, God incarnates. So I sent for the Secretary and also for Sita's mother. When I cooled down a bit, I made the two boys do

some sit-ups. There was some criticism of this action of mine. People thought that by inflicting punishment on the Sarups I had somehow inflicted insult on their divine originals.

Raghubar's day-long disappearances, his returning late in the evening with Ranjan, Bade Rai's ruthless caning of Raghubar – these were still troubling me. All sorts of possiblities suggested themselves. It was in this context that I was reminded of the incident involving the Ramlila Sarups, although that event dates back a long time. Was it possible that Bade Rai had chanced upon some such scene ? In the meantime the distance between Bade Rai and Chhote Rai had also grown. One of the possible reasons may have been that Arun now wrote to none except Chhote Rai. Even I had been dropped from his mailing list. Now he no longer needed money, thanks to Mr. Edward. Mr. Edward of course still wrote to Bade Rai, and Bade Rai used that channel to keep track of Arun. Every fourth or fifth month I still sent him some money. I felt unhappy if I didn't. Arun would send a formal acknowledgement sometimes, sometimes he skipped even that.

Chhote Rai was peeved at the indifference displayed towards him by Bade Rai. So one day he went up to him and confronted him :

'What's been my fault, Bade Bhaiya, that you don't find me worthy of your attention any more ?' he asked directly.

'The fault is mine,' said Bade Rai. 'I feel I lack something. It's because of this lack that I lost Krishna, and I'm now losing you, bit by small bit. I'm unhappy that Arun is so far away, but I'm happy that he's accepted you totally in my place. You are now father to a promising son. By his attitude, Arun has helped me greatly in removing myself from his way. I don't know what might have happened if he hadn't. Perhaps I'd still be tied to him.'

Chhote Rai broke down : 'The privilege of being the father is always his who gives birth — who partners his birth.'

'No. That privilege belongs to him who can change into a conviction the child's feeling that he is his father. Perhaps he is the true father.

That was all Bade Rai said. There was no scope for continuing

the conversation further. I wanted to ask Chhote Rai to ask Bade Rai if he had chanced upon Raghubar and Ranjan in some compromising position that day, but, sensing the impasse, I desisted.

I couldn't delink the event of that day in my mind from the Ramlila event. I was obsessed with it. I still remembered my days with Kishen Babu. I don't know if it was a desire on my part that Raghubar should benefit from my experiences, but I was certain of the doubt that kept raising its head within me and I found my self unable to suppress it. One day I asked him directly :

'Why do you keep Ranjan's company ?'

'I like Ranjan Chacha. He is my only protector outside the house.'

'Do you know who he is ?' I was now stooping low, but I was so worried about my son's character that I had lost all discretion.

'Majhhale Baba's son, of course.' He replied promptly.

'No, he's not your Chacha.'

I was thinking that if Raghubar asked me I would tell him the truth. That might have forced him to think. But he didn't ask. He only said : 'He is the Chacha. Everyone says so,' and he ran away. Even then I was unable to appreciate that the tone of absolute trust in which he spoke precluded all doubts. Possibly my own past, digging into my flesh like a thorn, was holding me back.'

The Rai family had undergone a complete transformation : from a sunrise family it had become a sunset family. The glory which was its only a short time ago was all set to disappear. So much so that two horses had died one after another; now only two were left. One of them was fairly old. It could still pull a coach, but was beginning to buckle if ridden. Its knees were calloused. Of course, only the rider felt the buckling. We also heard that Rani's father-in-law had sold off George to some roving horse- trader. Bade Rai was very upset but couldn't decide on a course of action. He sent Kale to Rani's place to find out who it had been sold to : he would pay any price to get it back. That 'any price' bit was a flight of the imagination, I thought.

When Rani saw Kale, she burst out crying. 'I entreated them not to sell it and send it to Bade Rai instead. I'll get from him

the price you want, I said. My husband can't open his mouth before his father. Gets into his clothes and is out of the house first thing in the morning. So I also spoke to my father-in-law directly. But he said : 'When'll you come home, *bahu* ? So many years gone since your marriage, and you're still living at your father's place? It was over this horse that your father had refused to listen to a small request from my son and his son-in- law. If I hadn't threatened to bring the barat back, he wouldn't have bothered at all. It's quite immaterial to me what he says or thinks now : his word has no meaning for me. And as for the price – send word to him that if ever he wants to mortgage his zamindari, he can come here.'

Rani sighed and said : 'I was helpless. George left us before my own eyes. I watched him go from my window and cried at my helplessness. He was like a third son to me, after Raju and Mauju.'

Kale tried his best to locate the buyer of George but couldn't. Almost everyone in that town was familiar with George and admired him. With his head lifted at an angle, he rode through the town and people at once knew that here was a prince's mount. When Kale returned empty-handed, Bade Rai was struck dumb. In the end he said : 'Kale, I have a feeling my George is in trouble. His curse was on me when I lost two of my horses. Perhaps the stables are going to be emptied soon.'

When Chhote Rai proposed that they buy a car, Bade Rai said : 'Yes, go ahead. I have however spent my life with animals and have no wish to start a new life with machines at this stage of my life. Let me spend my remaining days too with these fellow-travellers.'

When the proposal received support from other quarters too, he elaborated :

'When I'm dead you can carry my dead body to Haridwar in a car, but while I live, God willing, these horses shall have whatever time I am left with.'

And, indeed, thence onwards the horses had all his attention. Perhaps men no longer mattered to him. Only those two horses

did. If one of them was slightly indisposed, he would have him brought over to the haveli and sat tending him all through the night. The treatment was his own. Two hours in the morning, before bath, were reserved for the horses. Anyone wishing to buy a horse would come to him for consultation, and he would run through the entire gamut of pluses and minuses : hair patterns of all sorts – *sapan, panch kalyan, āsū dhāl,* and so on and so forth. If he was informed that a thoroughbred was too sick to be brought to him, he would make it a point to make a house call. This was his only hobby now.

Once, absent-mindedly, Raghubar popped up a question to him :

'Baba, how come all your visitors are horses, no people?'

For a brief second, Bade Rai's face flushed red. Then he laughed and said : 'Maybe because I have ceased to be a person myself.'

Saranga's son was born in the summer. Her room had been fitted with khus panels to keep the heat from bothering the mother and the child. Sona was at her nānā's place. Padam was a lawyer now. Nānā had retired. Their family had different traditions, specially in matters of food. We believed in pure vs. impure foods. They didn't make this distinction, and ate everything including onion and garlic. We were therefore a little wary of sending our children to their place. The children too didn't want to go. Raghubar, in fact, never did, except when accompanying me. He said he felt their house smelled. Their children went to Convent schools, called their parents 'Mummy' and 'Daddy'. He hated this.

Girwar's birth was celebrated in a big way. Bade Rai couldn't help the thought that his was the only flourishing branch among the brothers. We gave one of our sons to Raghav and God compensated us with another. Raghubar too was rejoicing, but his happiness was of a different sort from Bade Rai's. He woke up in the morning to discover that new mother had given birth to a baby. Immediately after the birth, *sūtak* had begun. The room was divided with a curtain, and the half where Saranga lay with the

baby was segregated. Anyone going into that portion of the room, except the midwife, had to immediately purify himself/herself with a bath. Till this was done, he wasn't allowed to touch anything. Of course this did not apply if you were in a hospital.

When Raghubar was born, Kala was in a serious condition. Doctors came and went all the time. We too had to enter the room time and again. I, in fact, asked the doctor once if she purified herself with a bath every time. She laughed and said : 'The child and mother are gifts of God to us. In our profession, everytime we go near the child we must wash ourselves first. There's more to purify ourselves against outside.'

I was now thinking of her words.

Chhoti Chachi was already dead. Majhhali Chachi meant little to us. She would drop in on some special occasions, but that depended on her sweet will. So we had to send for Rani. She was still anguished and ashamed about the sale of George and was chary of the topic. Her sons too had come with her, till then only two – Raju and Mauju. They were town-bred rowdies. Totally unruly, foul-mouthed and violent. Scrapping all the time. Rani had to put up with a lot of shame and embarrassment on their account. Rani had been coming for short spells on festivals and other similar occasions earlier, but the boys were still young then, and she didn't feel so embarrassed. But this time her kids had shamed her in her own eyes. Actually, they cared for none except for their māmā, or their elder nānā (=Bade Rai). They were quite comfortable with Chhote Rai. There was another thing about Bade Rai : he was partial to Raghubar vis-a-vis the two boys. Rani resented this.

The newborn still had to undergo the purification ritual. Though Raghubar was no longer a child, one day he took it in his head that he would go and hold the baby despite the *sūtak*. The *panditāyan's* solution was that he would take all his clothes off, wrap a towel around his waist, go in and then bath immediately after he came out. The towel would then be given away to the scavenger. That was what he did. He went and sat there for some

time with the baby in his lap. The maternity area was lit only with an oil-lamp in those days in the belief that strong light could damage the eyes of the child as well as the mother. In the dim light he couldn't even see the baby's face clearly. Rani *buā* stood outside and was laughing at him : 'Such a grown up boy and baby-keen to see the baby!'

When he had his fill of the baby, Raghubar handed the baby back and got up. As he was getting up, he tried to support himself with a hand on the ground, but the hand fell on the towel, and it was yanked off despite his clumsy attempts to retrieve it. He was grown up enough to know nudity and was shocked by his detowelling. Saranga laughed out loud and, wittingly or not, let out the sentence : 'Hey ! You've grown as big as your father !'

He felt he was falling down a cave shaped like a hollow cylindrical pipe. It took him a few seconds to recover. He looked at himself, then at new mother, snatched the towel from the ground, wrapped it around himself, rushed to the bathroom and slammed the door. But new mother's words and her laughter had preceded him there.

For many days afterwards, he didn't enter the inner quarters of the haveli. Though he was older, Raju and Mauju made fun of him and on one or two occasions there had been shouting matches and wrestling bouts. The question that buzzed in his head was : 'Why did new mother say that?'

A revolution was in the making. The superstars of the yesteryear had lost their lustre, the nonentities were becoming all powerful. Side by side, another change was afoot.

Muslims and Hindus were drifting farther apart. Gandhi stood like a rock against the rising tide of communalism, but he was almost alone. G.S. Vidhyarthi had already laid down his life at the altar of communal amity. Gandhi had made his offer to Jinnah : Form your government if you must, but, for God's sake, don't divide the country. The Congress will support you. But the Congress was tight-lipped. Everyone repeated the same dire prediction : If you allow this, there'll be bloodshed. Even the closest associates of

Gandhi were not prepared to listen to him on this issue. They were all aging, and their worry was that they might never be able to enjoy the fruits of their struggle. Gandhi was helpless. He wanted to avoid partition of the country at any cost. He was hopeful that partition could still be stalled, some way around the communal problem could still be found, but who had the patience to wait? Gandhi found himself fighting a lone war. Everyone was in a hurry. Gandhi wanted them to cleanse their motives : freedom, he thought, couldn't be denied to us any longer. But, for his associates, Gandhi's usefulness lay only in snatching independence from the British and helping themselves into the seats of power. Once that had been accomplished, Gandhi could give up the ghost for all they cared. And if, in the process, the country had to be divided, why, then, so be it !

I was not a politician, but from what I saw and heard this was the assessement I had made. Now that so much water has flown down the Ganga, and I am on the last leg of my journey, I cannot help feeling that had the division of the country been avoided even at the cost of some more bloodshed, the rivers of hatred that have been flooding the banks since the partition could have been stopped at the source. As things turned out, we got the worst of both the worlds : a divided country and rivers of hatred. Gandhi was then looked upon either as a cranky old man or a *messiah.* The zamindars considered Gandhi an eccentric and an unpractical man. India may well have been a secular country all along, but people widely felt then, and perhaps still do, that India is basically a Hindu nation. It has been the misfortune of this country to have been called what it has never been. One may, however, well ask why Nehru and Patel did not listen to Gandhi, if they indeed did not consider India a Hindu nation. Why didn't they let Jinnah take over power ? Questions like these still trouble people. A few years ago,when Nehru was on a tour of India, Rafi Kidwai had declared that he was capable of taking over Nehru's role so completely that people wouldn't miss Nehru at all. But no sooner had he said this, he received God's summons and departed this world. And take Indira Gandhi ! She may well be Jawaha lal's

daughter, but after her marriage to Feroze everyone considered her a Parsi, and yet she is the PM today.

Anyway, when partition was announced, a wave of violence was unleashed on the country. Our town too had a good number of Muslim families and many of them lived close to our haveli. Just as in the old days capital cities were founded along river banks, so in our times people preferred to settle close to a haveli or a fortress. Many of the Muslim families were now preparing to leave for Pakistan, since they had begun to see India as the country of Hindus. Their own country, they thought, was Pakistan. In any case, once Pakistan had come into being, they felt, Hindus would be mad at them.

Hasan Miyan was one of the best lawyers in town. Most of our zamindari cases were handled by him. His full name was Ali Hasnain, and he was a Syed. Syeds are to the Muslim community what Brahmins are to the Hindu : educated and religious-minded. He had two nephews, his sister's sons, living with him – Akhtar and Shaukat. They were bosom friends of Arun, specially Akhtar. Arun and Akhtar played together every evening and always returned home together. The parents of the boys had died when they were still very young and they had been brought up by their mama. Both did excellently in studies. Akhtar grew up to be an IAS officer, Shaukat a judge. Akhtar married into the family of the Nawab of Rampur. He died of a heart attack a couple of years ago. The way it turned out, his begum came from a family too rich for him, his own origins being rather humble. Disagreements multiplied. Akhtar took to drinking and spending his time away from home. Shaukat settled down in London with both his kids. Before he left India, I spoke to him. I asked him how it was that he had chosen to stay when he should have left, and had chosen to leave now when he should have stayed. He said : 'Bhaijaan, I am still not going to Pakistan!' and laughed.

When he had finally decided to leave for Pakistan, Ali Hasnain paid Bade Rai a visit. Bade Rai was extremely sad about his decision and asked him : 'Why are you going to Pakistan, Hasnain Sahib? Who is there for you to go to? What have we done to offend

you? Or is it that you think that fellow religionists are closer to you than your friends? I am surrounded by Hindus. Do you think they are closer to me than you are ?'

Hasan Miyan found that a tough one to crack, but still managed to produce a reason :

'Once we have asked for and got a nation of our own, with what face can we claim a share in this nation too? Is it not dishonesty if we do? Only till yesterday, India was our only country, the one we called our own. Can we call two countries our own? Doesn't man have one and only one country, as he has one and only one soul?'

Bade Rai laughed and said : 'Let those reply to that question who've divided the country, but why should we allow ourselves to be separated? You have your roots in this country. You can transplant a seedling, but can you transplant a full-grown tree? Will the new soil accept it? Will the tree be able to stay green in the new surroundings? I know of no method by which you can do it.'

Ali Hasnain was sad. 'You know very well, Bade Rai,' he said, 'I opposed the partition from the very start, but it has become a reality. My conscience does not allow me to stay on now.'

'I can't agree with you there. This country belongs to all of us. We've all been born and brought up here. When the birds turn homeward in the evening and fly over our homes, they call out our names and ask us how we are. They fill the air with their twitter and call out goodnight to us : May God be with you! See you tomorrow ! The only sensible thing Gandhi ever said was that – 'The country may have been divided, but India still belongs to everyone. I vow to bring back those who have left us."

Ali Hasnain had a lump in his throat. 'Rai Sahib, not everyone is a Gandhi,' he said, 'I've come to you for a special purpose. I want your help.'

'I'll be happy if I can be of any help to you. Though now that you are leaving I don't see when and how I can help you.

'I have two nephews – Akhtar and Shaukat. I and my begum have done everything in our power to persuade them to come with

us, but they are firm. Who's there in that country we can call our own, they ask. And who's here we cannot call our own? I don't wish to force them, yet I do not know where I can leave these orphans. I can only think of you.'

Bade Rai closed his eyes and leaned back. When he didn't speak for a while, Ali Hasnain looked closely at him and said : 'Please don't upset yourself. I won't insist.'

'No, that's not it. I'll be happy to have Akhtar and Shaukat with me. But financially I'm no longer in a position to get them the education they deserve. Arun has now to earn his own living in England. They are both bright students and I'd not like to see their future put in jeopardy. That's what makes me a bit hesitant.'

Ali Hasnain said : 'My sister had left fifty thousand rupees with me for their studies. That money never went into a bank since Shariat denounces interest, and so is still with me. There is some jewellery too. This may well be the last time I can be of any help to my nephews, so I am also leaving fifty thousand rupees for them. That'll make a hundred thousand. Since times are changing and even Islamic countries also now have banks, you may deposit the money in a bank if you like. The interest should be enough to take care of their needs. I shall get them admitted to a hostel at the Aligarh Muslim University. My only wish is that they should keep to the straight path and achieve something so that I can face my sister and her husband on the *Day of Reckoning*. It is my wish that you keep the money and the jewellery with you till they become independent and are able to support themselves.'

Bade Rai was very polite : 'You know very well I am a Hindu; also at the moment short of money. I may be tempted.'

Ali Hasnain laughed it off : 'Rai Sahib, some people are neither Hindu nor Muslim. And when they are short of money they don't go and sell their conscience. But if some day you do decide to sell Bhaskar Babu and Arun Rai down the river, it will not hurt me if these two go with them too. Now I'll be obliged if you permit me to leave.'

Arrangements for their stay were made in a small double-storied

house nearby. One room, a kitchen and a verandah upstairs, a big hall, which was always closed, downstairs – that comprised the accomodation. The money had been deposited in the Imperial Bank before Ali Hasnain left. Withdrawals were possible only with cheques countersigned by Bade Rai. The jewellery was returned to Hasan Miyan. At twenty-five or thirty rupees (per tola, approximately 11 gms), gold was quite cheap then. Bade Rai had been able to persuade Ali Hasnain to come to India on the occasion of the boys' marriages and do the honours. He could then present the jewellery to the brides personally.

Whenever the pair came home on vacation, they stayed there. Conditions being what they were, Bade Rai was tense with worry about their safety. He was constantly praying to God that he may be able to complete the period of his trusteeship without any mishap, or stain on his honour. The day the two boys became their own guardians and stood on their own feet, he would heave a sigh of relief. Whenever the boys were in town, someone or the other was always dropping in on them; they too had to look in at the haveli mornings and evenings. Bade Rai himself kept a strict watch on their studies.

At first, they were supposed to take their meals at the haveli. This arrangement didn't last very long. They were served their meals in separate dishes. A man always went to call them at meal times lest they should feel ignored. After meals, they put the dishes near the well, where fire was tossed into them to burn out the impurity; later a *maharī* would wash and put them away. One day the two boys went up to Bade Rai and said with folded hands : 'Abbaji, (They addressed Bade Rai and Chhote Rai as Bade Abba and Chhote Abba respectively, being Arun-equivalents) we'd like to start our own kitchen there, if....'

Bade Rai examined their faces and said : 'I wanted you to stay near me whenever you are in town, so that I know if you are being properly looked after. But if you have to run your own kitchen, what good does it do for us to be near you?'

They said nothing but kept standing. Bade Rai knew that their minds were made up, and that his words would not be enough

to shake their resolve. So he continued :

'But if there is some other reason, you can make your arrangements and see how they work out. Our doors will however always remain open to you.'

The two looked at each other, bowed in *salaam* to Bade Rai and came away.

Ours was the only town which had so far been spared the riots. Aligarh was seriously affected, so the boys were called back, but our town too was not entirely untouched by the wind that swept the nation. One could feel the tension. Not surprisingly, the two boys were also showing signs of insecurity. One could see it in the guarded way in which they walked. In a locality in the other part of the town, a couple of knifings had been reported, provoking more knifings at the Sarwat Gate. The two boys did not stir out much except for visits to the haveli. At night, they took turns at the watch, though the house was known to belong to the Rai family. They probably felt that they could be attacked any time. Akhtar was more courageous of the two, and he tried to reassure Shaukat too : 'Even if we are killed, Shaukat, we'll have the satisfaction that it was our own decision to die here – here at this place where we were born, where we grew up, and which is our own soil ! But I don't think it's likely to happen so long as we're under Bade Rai's wing.'

Once Shaukat couldn't help verbalizing a fear which lurked in him : 'In his eyes too we must be Muslims, or why should we be served in separate dishes?'

Akhtar was silent for a minute, but rallied immediately :

'This has to do with the two religions. When our Mamu invited Hindu guests to meals, he too was careful to see that they were served Hindu food in separate dishes or leaf-bowls, which no one else touched. Do you remember what Mamu told Bade Rai when he said that he too was a Hindu? He said that some people are neither Hindu nor Muslim. Bade Rai is one of them. Appearances are often deceptive and it would be wrong to base our conclusions on appearances alone. Mamu knew this, or he wouldn't have left us in his care.'

'He didn't want to. It was we who insisted.'

'God willing, we won't have to regret it. But if we do, we must be ready to take the consequences of our decisions. Mamu used to say decisions are like children : you make a mistake during their formative stages and you pay for it all your life.'

Despite the brave words, there were moments when Shaukat's fears infected Akhtar too; and he was filled with apprehension. But then he reminded himself that he was the older brother.

There was a spate of knifings in several different localities of the town. Curfew was imposed. Rumours, like hot winds, raged through the town. They were alone in the house, frightened and despairing. Bade Rai himself went to bring them to the haveli. They had bolted themselves in and sat in the kitchen on a rug spread on the floor. Every now and then their eyes met, but there was no answer to the question Shukat asked again and again : 'What's going to happen now?' Akhtar, unable to say much, just patted his shoulder and said : 'The Almighty can work wonders.'

I knocked at the door. At first they didn't respond. After a while, when they opened the door they were distinctly startled to see me. Bade Rai was still sitting in the coach. Shaukat closed the door again. I resented it. Their faces told me that my presence at their door had struck terror in their hearts. By then Bade Rai had also joined me, and Shaukat had Akhtar with him. When Akhtar saw both of us, he promptly opened the door. But his face too spoke the same question : 'In this curfew?' They certainly didn't look as reassured to see us as they should have, in fact, as they usually did. I was glum.

The fright on Shaukat's face took on a darker colour. Akhtar was holding up.

Bade Rai called Akhtar to him : 'Come here, son.'

They both stepped forward together. Bade Rai laughed out : 'Don't be scared. The town is completely under curfew. I've come to take you home.'

'We're doing fine here, Bade Abba!'

Bade Rai laughed again. 'Come on, don't look so terrorstricken.

Look on me as your Mamu. I know that in times like these one begins to suspect even the closest friends. Your Mamu left you in my charge. He too, sitting there, must be wondering how we're treating you here..'

'But ...'

'No ifs and buts, son. If you're thinking that you should have left with Mamu, that's fine; but if you didn't and are still here, that's fine too.'

Shaukat didn't understand and started crying, getting closer to Akhtar and clinging to him.

This behaviour of Shaukat gave Bade Rai a jolt, as his closing the door after opening it once had given to me. Have they become so panicky at the riots that their very benefactors look like killers to them? Is this the reward of so many days of loving care given to them? Bade Rai was lost in these thoughts for a moment, but he quickly recovered and said : 'You have no reason for fear. The haveli is like this country : we have lived together for centuries. There is no other place like one's country and there is no other place like home. So long as I live – I am your Mamu. Come with me !'

They moved inside. Akhtar reassured Shaukat. 'Come on ! Have courage ! If riots can harm us there, they can reach us here too. God is the saviour – neither man nor death can touch us if He is with us. Death is a weapon in His hands. It doesn't act without His will.'

They came out with their daily necessities in a bag. At the haveli, they kept closely behind Bade Rai, crouching in fear, alert like deer. In twenty-four hours, our way of looking at them had changed : they looked like strangers walking into the haveli for the first time. The only one in his natural behaviour was Raghubar. He came and stood behind Bade Rai's chair. Bade Rai called out to Bhavani : 'Take their things to the room next to mine. They'll be staying here till the town returns to peace and quiet. See that they are not inconvenienced in any way.'

They were both very senior to Raghubar. Yet Raghubar was by their side in one jump as if they had been great chums. That brought some cheer to their faces. Then a strange thing occurred.

Bade Rai suddenly made an announcement :

'No separate dishes for them! They'll be treated like Raghubar.'

Nobody spoke then, but a wave of protest ran through the house. There were comments and criticism. Nobody dared to speak to Bade Rai, but everyone, from servants to the members of the family, now turned against Akhtar and Shaukat. The boys, on the other hand, seemed to be relieved at last.

Saranga kept nagging me : 'The old man has gone bonkers! So religious and yet so irreligious! Nobody will ever touch the water of this house again! He's beaten the *samājīs* this time!' Saranga however continued the fire-tossing routine on the sly, and added a Gangajal wash to increase its efficacy. Only I and Bhavani knew of this. Bade Rai insisted on their being served the meals in his presence. The slightest oversight and we got it !

Money was getting scarcer now. Chhote Rai had assumed an otherworldly stance. Bade Rai had anyway never concerned himself with such mundane matters, except maintaining an overall check. The purse-strings were in my hands, and I had to raise all the cash. Late one night, the thought occurred to me that these two boys had a pile in the bank : couldn't we borrow some of it temporarily? Lost in such thoughts I wandered off towards their room. There was a rear entry to the room. I approached it from that end and peeped in. Shaukat was sleeping, but Akhtar was awake – probably keeping watch.

He woke up the other one. 'There's someone – there on the rear side!' he said. He came closer to check. I withdrew. Possibly my motive was to give them a scare, for their money was actually controlled by Bade Rai. The more I thought about it later, the more I was surprised at myself. Why did I go to their room so late at night ? Did I want to kill them ? I didn't think so. Maybe I just wanted to give them a scare. Perhaps it's human nature to frighten other and thus to keep them under your thumb. But why? I had no answer. And, in any case, the two were already so scared that frightening them further had no meaning at all.

Unable to accept what I had done, next morning I asked Akhtar :

'Akhtar, you're so scared even inside the haveli ?'

He was uncomfortable. 'No, Bade Bhaiya.' Both of them called me 'Bade Bhaiya'.

'At night I came out to check. Shaukat was asleep but you were awake. You then woke him up saying there was someone at the rear door. I came back without talking to you. I thought you might feel even more insecure seeing me, as you did that time.'

Both of them were embarrassed. Akhtar, however, handled it well.

'Bade Bhaiya,' he said 'I don't know why but sometimes we're scared of our own people. This may be due to our lack of confidence in ourselves, or may be due to the difference in our mumbers.'

I think now that I was also to blame.

The riots subsided after a few days. Peace reigned again. One still heard of stray cases of stabbings, but there were no fatalities. The two boys started visiting their place, though late at night they returned to sleep at the haveli. Aligarh was still tense and the university remained closed.

One day, Bade Rai called both of them and told them :

'Sons, I noticed that during the riots you were scared. That was natural. We tried our best to see that you got rid of your fear, but maybe the conditions were too serious for that. I now want to ask you a question in all seriousness. Do you want to go to your Mamu in Pakistan ? If you do, I'll see to it that the necessary arrangements are made. A life of fear is no life : it amounts to putting up with terror impotently. Live where you can live fearlessly : that's life. However death is everywhere – there as much as it's here. Of course, the mask it wears may be different. The only difference will be that you will feel secure and relaxed.

They said nothing then. A few days later, however, they returned and said :

'We've decided to stay here. Actually, we had no reason to be so scared. Maybe it was because we've always been told that Hindus are our enemies. That was probably the fear that held us in its grip. The love you've given us has rooted out that fear from

us now. We've also written to Mamu about it.'

I did not speak, but the memory of that night floated back to me. The Devil himself must have possessed me. If, by any chance, I had let myself go, that seed of hatred towards Hindus in their minds would have grown into a mighty oak. It takes no time, no implanting and no watering for the tiniest seed of fear in the mind to grow into a giant tree.

I simply gave them both a few reassuring pats on their sh lders. For a brief moment, Bade Rai's eyes shone with pleasure.

A few days later, a letter was received from Mr. Edward in London. A letter from Edward or any other English friend added a year to Bade Rai's life, or, let's say, made him younger by a year. For him it was as if Edward still represented the British crown : he still comm nded the same awe and deference. This, in spite of the fact that the country was now divided and the natives were ruling the country. During the British period, when a British officer went on transfer to another place, or returned to England at the completion of his assignment, he left behind a confidential note as part of his charge report. This note, among other things, contained a detailed account of the local personages. This was the report which determined the behaviour of the new incumbent towards the local people. It told him who to befriend, who to keep at an arm's length, who was greedy and who was generous, who was a pest and who didn't give a damn. In other words, the report contained a brief run-down on every important citizen of the town. Unless the officer's own experience of a person went against a portraiture, he reposed his total faith in it. Fifty per cent of the credit for the success of the British rule in India went to these notes.

The differences between Bade Rai and Majhhale Rai were a topic that these officers took great pleasure in detailing. The Collector and the Police Captain were not the only ones to write about Bade Rai; even the Governor included his name in the list of important people of the state. Whenever a new Lat came, he made it a point to either invite him, or, if he happened to be on tour, to put his name on the top of the list of people who would be seeing him.

Memories of these old days found nostalgic references in Edward's letters too – Bade Rai was not the only one to be teased by them. In fact, this was true of all those officers who had returned to England. Their letters showed that India occupied a permanent corner in their hearts, and it was still a wrench to think of it. Bade Rai fished out the old letters and the certificates which they had written to and for him. Edward had written:

'Mr. Hari Rai is a man of honour and rare distinction. He is among the most highly respected citizens not only of this town but of the entire state. I had the privilege of a fairly long association with this honourable gentleman, and it is an association I and my wife will cherish throughout our lives. Mr. Hari Rai is an orthodox Hindu, but he bears no hatred for anyone no matter what his religion or race. His only sore point is his younger brother, Mr. Krishna Rai. The strain in their relationship has caused considerable agony to Mr. Hari Rai. Mr. Krishna Rai is constantly devising new ways of torturing him as do our English women when they want to divorce their husbands. I pray to God that He may put a quick end to this unhappy chapter of Mr. Rai's life.'

Since the letter was written in English, it used the singular number, which, in our language, we consider rude. However the names all carried the prefix Mr.

Bade Rai found great comfort whenever he read this testimonial. Krishna Rai, once an organic part of his sensibility, had now been lopped off like a dead limb. It left a mark, of course. When you have lost a limb, the flesh and the skin at the spot pucker and gather up as on a stump. You feel it and it grates. It was exactly the same way with Krishna Rai. He has separated, we have cut him off, then why this grating aftermath? Why the fretful memories? Can't we forget him? Can't we pull up the very roots and cast them out? After all, how deep can you take the cut ? Wherever you cut, the end will always pucker and gather up in a crimp. He sighed: 'Krishna Rai!'

He had already read Edward's letter once. Now he read it once again, though there was really nothing new in it:

Dear Hari Rai,

I am growing old. The picture I have of you in my mind, however, is the one that I remember from the time of my departure from India. I still picture you as young and radiant. As for me, I'm now becoming quite confident that in a few months, at most a year, I shall join my Maker in the true spirit of the Indian Sufis. I do not know how I'll be received.

I can't help being struck occasionally by the sheer generosity of this earth. When we are living, we hesitate even to touch it; later we cling to it and lose ourselves in its embrace, as if we were its long-lost sons impatient for the warmth of its bosom. And she accepts us with all our obscenities, and makes us a part of her own existence. Without wasting a jot, she serves us as feast to its children. The worms and the maggots have a jolly time. But you won't understand all this since yours is a fiery end. You may well be wondering why I am gabbing away like this. Alice passed away last week. I didn't quite understand her great hurry to leave. Maybe she was eager to find a new lover. Were it not for Arun, I wouldn't know what to do. I know that in your mind you must still see Alice as you saw her on the day of our farewell to India. Persons we lose young, be it by death or separation, stay young in our memories. You never saw Alice in her old age. The older she grew, the more graceful she became. We liked to talk about you, for when :ve talked of you, we too became young with you. What a strange thing is imagination ! Dead in reality, she is every bit as beautiful and every bit as alive in my imagination !

My sons are grown up now. They were very small then, and dependent on us. They were probably the same age as Arun. Quite chummy with you, if you remember. Whenever you visited us, they took rides with you on your coach. The older one sat on the coachbox with the coachman: he always wanted to drive the coach. The younger one was scared. He would stand in the coach clutching the edge of the seat and kept calling to his brother: 'Mickey ! Hey, Mickey ! Come back here ! Please come back here.' Both of them have

forsaken me. I have practically no links with them now. I can now understand the agony you felt when Krishna Rai turned against you. How you were hurt! I have the satisfaction, however, that both my sons are masters of their destinies and quite happy too – to an extent. But no matter how happy one is, the fence that protects you also divides you from the others. It's not a custom in our society for the young ones to shoulder the responsibility of thei aged parents. Your country is infinitely richer in this regard.

I am a Hindu now. By that I do not mean that I paint my forehead creamy red. To be a Hindu is to believe that we take the consequences of our past actions, be they good or bad. If there's a rebirth, it's my desire to be born in your country. Arun has been a great help. I only leave him with my good wishes that he may be able to live the life he wants to. He knows how to love a fellow-being. He's only six months from the end of his course. I wish to complete my sojourn too within this period. May I depart before he does! In that case, this could well be my last letter to you.

Deep regards and Aadaab !

Yours,
Edward

Akhtar and Shaukat had joined the University of Allahabad. It was then the favourite grazing ground for those aspiring to join the bureaucracy through the competitive examinations. Allahabad produced some great scholars, bureaucrats, writers and politicians during this period. Originally, Arun too was supposed to join Allahabad, since Bade Rai's heart was set on making him a Deputy Collector. He had even taken him to Allahabad. But Arun refused. He was not prepared to spend so many years studying away from home. It was possible then to get into Thomson Engineering College at Roorkee directly after High School. In the time it took Arun to earn the Diploma and then the degree of engineering from England, Akhtar became an IAS officer. That was probably the first batch,

or may be the second. Shaukat had earned a law degree. After a short spell at the bar, he was selected a Munsif magistrate.

When Arun returned to India, Akhtar was posted at Lucknow. Arun went to see him. Akhtar was full of Bade Rai and the Rai family. Arun kept listening in glum silence till Akhtar began to smell a rat. He laughed and said: 'It's funny, Arun ! If someone had heaped so much praise on my father, I'd have been bursting with pride; but here you are – sitting frozen as if I have been talking about some stranger.'

Now Arun opened up. 'My father is a *Hatimtai* personifed to everyone else, but, to his brothers, . . .' He did not complete the sentence. He paused a little, them started afresh:

'My uncle, Chhote Rai, adopted me. He could also have adopted a Tom, Dick or a Harry like my elder uncle, Majhhale Rai, but he chose his elder brother's son. And how did Bade Rai treat him? You wouldn't know. When Chhote Rai forbade him to sell his share of property to keep his dinner parties and other fancy expenses going, Bade Rai got annoyed with him. So long as he allowed him a free run of his property, in Bade Rai's eyes Chhote Rai was all gem and sparkle, more fancied than his own sons. But the day Chhote Rai told him that the property now belonged to Arun, and might not be sold at will, both my father and my elder brother decided that he was an enemy. All his past services and sacrifices were flushed down the drain. How did they ever think they could grab another man's property?'

Akhtar didn't quite understand why Arun reacted the way he did, so he said :

'Arun Bhai, the words 'father' and 'mother' mean little to me. As a child, it was Mamu; when he went away to Pakistan, it was Bade Abba, Chhote Abba and Bade Bhaiya. The two of us had decided quite early that we'd not go to Pakistan. This caused pain to both Mamu and Mumani. It was a pain that lasted a long time. To this day we do not know why we decided the way we did. Was it the country ? Or was it your friendship ? But Mamu kept faith with us, and so did your family. During the riots, the fear got hold of us that they were after all Hindus and may well kill

us. I think of the time and I hang my head in shame. How did I and my brother ever entertain such a sacrilegious thought about the very person who granted us his protection and was showering us with his blessed favours? Mamu did say when he was going that he was leaving us with an angel, but, so potent was the fear of death, that we didn't even remind ourselves of his words. Probably this fear is the fate of every minority in a country. Mamu died last year. He attended the weddings of both of us. His decision to leave for Pakistan, he admitted, had been guided by sentiment. Neither of his sons, Mahboob and Tariq, was able to make a worthwhile career. Pakistan has not yet been able to assimilate them. Punjabis dominate the country and the Muslims of U.P. are a shade less Muslim for them than Muslims from their own country.'

Akhtar could have gone on, but Begum sent word that dinner was served. The dining room had a large photograph of Bade Rai, a smaller one of Mamu.

'But hanging pictures in the house is against the shariat, is it not ?' Arun asked mischievously.

'Yes, but there are some people who radiate the light of God *Himself*,' Akhtar said, laughing.

'What was that again?'

'O.K.,' said Akhtar. 'Let it stay the way I said it, let's not pull it out of shape. I know you're freshly home from a British education.'

The Begum laughed.

Arun was married a few days later. His wife came from a rich family, though it wasn't a blue-blooded one. They'd made a lot of money during the second World War. Naturally, they beat many a blue-blooded family hollow when their daughter' wedding took place. Bade Rai too threw a big dinner party. But at the time of the *milai*, when the father of the bride and the bridegroom formally meet each other, Bade Rai and I stood in the second line. Chhote Rai had put himself first. In some corner of his mind, Bade Rai still believed that, at the *milai*, Chhote Rai would give him the pride of place. He had almost made up his mind to decline the

honour, if offered. But neither Chhote Rai offered him the privilege, nor he got the pleasure of declining it. Strange are the ways of man: he gets more pleasure in refusing a compliment than in accepting it, provided he can get someone to pay it first ! The bride too touched Chhote Rai's feet first. Of course, she also touched Bade Rai's and mine too, but only next. Arun wasn't guilty even of that. Bade Rai suddenly shrunk and kept shrinking. He realized that neither Chhote Rai nor Arun needed him now. But it was a realization he didn't allow to show on his face.

Arun's wife was the best-educated daughter-in-law to set foot in the Rai haveli, more educated than even Kala. Also, it was for the first time that the purdah had been disregarded. The proposal for this came from Chhote Rai himself. This resulted in a reverse purdah system for Bade Rai. If he suddenly found himself face to face with Chhoti Bahu, he would at once turn around with his back to her, or, if a towel was handy, used it as a screen. Chhoti Bahu made fun of him to Arun. 'Your Bade Rai is a *zenana*,' she would say. Arun never made any attempt to check her. Loud laughter came floating from Chhote Rai's wing of the house. The wing, it is true, had reopened now for the first time after the death of Chhoti Chachi. At every opportunity, Chhote Rai went and sat talking to Chhoti Bahu. He enjoyed her company very much, talked to her about this and that, took her on a guided tour of all the dark and lighted corners of his life, and often concentrated his talk on Bade Rai and me, especially Bade Rai. If Bade Rai had not stopped him from joining the Congress, he would have been a minister today. Bhaskar had concentrated all the work of the zamindari in his own hands, turning Chhote Rai into an idle layabout. If he had not spoken up, they would have sold off Arun's share of the property too, and because he spoke up, everyone now takes him to be an enemy. Months would pass now before he spent an evening with Bade Rai. They of course ran into each other every day, but there were no 'meetings'. Bade Rai, in his heart of hearts, was always waiting: waiting for Raghav to turn up to talk to him, waiting for Arun to come and ask : Baba, how are you ? And waiting for him to come and tell him about himself. His wait was now

beginning to torture him like a half-quenched thirst, as the space between them filled up day after day with wordless hesitancy. Then one day Bade Rai called Chhote Rai and said:

'Raghav, are you all unhappy with me ?'

'Why do you say that, Bade Bhaiya ?'

'I have this feeling,' Bade Rai said, laughing, 'that you and Arun are trying to anaesthetize me for the final cut. But no matter how much you insensitize a limb before cutting it, it is sure to leave a mark. The mark will show, and, if the cutting is not done expertly, the wound may even hurt.'

Chhote Rai's face went pale. 'What are you saying, Bade Bhaiya ?' he spluttered.

'Only what I have been feeling all along. You are only doing what Krishna did earlier. The difference is that he did it at one go while you are taking your time over it.'

'No ... no ...'

'There's no need to discuss it further. I only wanted to tell you that if you find us – me, Bhaskar, a bahu and kids – a bother, and are uncomfortable with us, you can also take the Krishna way. The Rajbaha kothi is available. I'd have done it myself, but family tradition binds me. The eldest Rai doesn't leave the post. I must meet my end here.'

Chhote Rai revived and answered at once:

'If you feel that way, I'll ask Arun.'

'Yes, do. Take my advice. If relationships can't be pleasurable, let's not allow them to make our lives miserable either.

Within a week, Chhote Rai had moved his clan to the Rajbaha kothi. The place had not been lived in for a long time. Later we discovered that, Chhote Rai, in whose share of property it anyway lay, had been getting the place done up for many days: Bade Rai's advice came as a welcome excuse. Chhote Rai had been finding it difficult to muster enough courage to broach the subject to Bade Rai. By taking the initiative, Bade Rai had relieved him of his predicament, and had taken upon himself the blame for the severance of the relationships with his brother and son. Majhhale

Rai felt himself avenged. His words had proved prophetic. Bade Rai's own son had deserted him. When one of your own family breaks away from you, he loves to see the family splintered. That made this episode particularly painful to Bade Rai.

Arun's bahu left the haveli without even the formality of touching Bade Rai's feet. They all picked up their things and left through the back door. Bade Rai kept waiting for the bahu. If she had come, he would have blessed her, and maybe offered some elderly advice. Chhote Rai came. 'Bade Bhaiya,' he said, 'We're moving to the kothi ... Arun liked your advice. He said if it's your counsel, we must act on it.'

Bade Rai looked at him over the top edge of his glasses and said: 'It was wise of you to follow my advice.'

Chhote Rai waited for a few minutes, hoping Bade Rai might say something. He didn't and Chhote Rai walked away.

A part of the haveli was now deserted. The haveli was like his heart. So long as the heart was beating to its rhythm, everything was fine. But now he was beginning to feel that there was a part of the heart where blood had no entry. The part was devoid of all activity; naturally blood didn't circulate to it. The blood swelled like a rising tide, but, beaten, fell back on itself. The thought that the dispensation in which he had thrived was now crumbling pursued him everywhere. With that dispensation, he too was crumbling. I was the only one left now to watch him disintegrate. With what hopes he had brought up Arun! What dreams he had woven round that boy! I was a very poor focal point for all those hopes and dreams, and he knew it. He was always conscious of what he had lost with Arun. If Arun had been living with him, he would have felt himself to be the father of a son who enjoyed the status of an Englishman! An engineer trained in England! A man who moved on a plane of equality with those who had ruled this country! The same officers still called all the shots in the government. And this, despite the fact that I had spent all my life at his beck and call ! My sons were his flunkeys. But his cheer, his happiness had left with Arun, never to return. In fact, if Arun

had stayed, the sheer happiness of his association would have given Bade Rai a fresh lease of life, even if, rather than Arun awaiting his pleasure like all of us, it was he who had to await Arun's.

My son, Raghubar, was also closely attached to Bade Rai. What he missed in the family quarters of the haveli, he tried to find in his closeness to Bade Rai. He enjoyed his status as Bade Rai's grandson. In later years, the same status was to crush him with a sense of inferiority. That was when he began to see himself as the product of the exploiting class, the class that had erected its edifice of wealth and honour on the sweat and blood of the poor, that had enjoyed all the pleasures of life without ever having worked for them. He did not share the belief that pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, were all matters of destiny. But that's a later story. It was sufficient then to know for him that he was the son of Hari Rai. That's the way the priorities went – from grandfather to grandson. The father was hardly mentioned. If mentioned at all, it was only in the context that he was the grandson of Hari Rai and the son of Bhaskar Rai. This was said with pride then. The same thing later turned into an embarrassment. My reactions were altogether of a different sort. In the presence of those two, I almost shrank into zero. My father and my son were beginning to look very distinguished to me. For Raghubar, for a long time, Bade Rai was the role model. As for me, I never got round to having role models.

Raghubar was fast becoming to me somewhat like the cap which the Holi fund-raisers, during the run-up to Holi, often lifted clean off one's head using a fisherman's angle and hook, and would not return till a contribution had been made. This was a very common happening then. Sometimes a slight error in aim would rip the back of one's head open. I had a strong feeling I was witnessing a similar operation in progress. . .

What seemed to be happening was that I was being gradually eliminated from the position I occupied between Bade Rai and Raghubar. On a couple of occasions, I was even told that Raghubar had spliced himself directly to Bade Rai, doing a neat job of cutting me out by declaring himself to be Bade Rai's son. He must have

thought nobody would ever find out. This upset me a little. But possibly it was just a boyish prank. Moreover, I was in no position to reveal it to anyone. Where was the court of appeal for a complaint against myself and my son ? Arun too had given up his father, but only after he had achieved something in life. Raghubar, on the other hand, had switched fathers on the very first step of his career. He was of course not yet mature enough to understand the pain that it would cause to me. Blinded by the razzle-dazzle of his grandfather's glamour, he was trying to wish away an irremediable reality. If you start your journey of self- glorification on the wrong foot, you cannot but find yourself having to repeat the same error again and again. It is like an error in an arithmetical sum which, having escaped your attention once, leaves a trail of other errors, all hard to trace back to their origin. On such occasions, Saranga found a golden opportunity to do me and Raghubar down. Bade Rai was of course blind to the ballooning ego of the boy. Chhote Rai was miles away – our sorrows and joys were practically of no concern to him now. Had he been living here, I felt, he would have taken in the whole scenario at one glance. I missed him a lot on such occasions.

He did drop in now and then. Usually these visits were spot checks on our general wellbeing. He couldn't resist the haveli: he used to say the haveli has a scent of its own, a special blend whose ingredients included the smell of the cowdung, the smells of the respective sweats of the people high and low, as well as the fragrance of the expensive perfumes which Bade Rai procured from far and near, and with which he brushed the collars of his guests on special occasions. 'Sudden blasts of this scent often hit me wherever I am, and I feel the haveli calling out to me; I feel I must immediately wing my way here no matter where I am,' he used to say. When he was a member of the Congress, he used to say similar things. The smell that rises from from the soil of this land, he said, fills my nostrils. Whenever there are firings, or police excesses, or rioting, I can feel poison being let out in this air. But as time passed, his nose hardened to this smell. It would soon also be

hardened to the smell of the haveli. Sometimes, he even had tears in his eyes when he looked around him – the memories of the long years he had spent in the haveli came crowding back and he found himself envying Bade Rai, who was fortunate enough to be still living there. In such soft moments, it often occurred to me that I might mention to him the newly emerging equations between me and Raghubar, but I always held back. I don't know why. Was it my attachment to my son, or was it shame ? Chhote Rai and Bade Rai rarely came face to face now; when they did, all that happened was an exchange of greetings, or an inquiry about how Bade Rai was keeping, a couple of sentences in reply, and the meeting was over.

One day Chhote Rai asked me pointedly: 'Tell me, Bhaskar, can you ever bring yourself to behave like this with Raghubar ? How flint-hearted can Bade Rai be ! We – you, me or Arun – may view each other in a number of different ways, but for Bade Rai we should all look the same, shouldn't we ? Then why does he treat me so ?'

I kept my mouth tightly shut. It was exactly what I wanted to know from myself about my son.

Majhhale Rai's son, Ranjan, had flunked so many exams so many times that finally all hopes of his passing any exam had to be given up. People had begun to doubt whether he at all came from an educated family, and said so openly. The cap actually fitted all of us, maybe a little less or a little more. Raghubar, for example. He did not quite match Ranjan's performance, but couldn't be said to lag very far behind.

Ranjan's long-cherished dream of becoming a Police Inspector was nowhere near fulfilment. This caused great anxiety to Majhhale Rai. All the love and fondness his mother showered on him was now acting like poison for Ranjan. Majhhale Rai's links with Bade Rai had now almost been completely severed. It wasn't quite clear if Ranjan had or hadn't delivered Bade Rai's message to his father that day, but Bade Rai had assumed that the message had been delivered and Majhhale Rai had consciously chosen to disregard

it. One believes what one wishes to believe, and disbelieves what one does not wish to believe. One doesn't feel the necessity of making any inquires in this connection. It was also being currently rumoured that Ranjan was falling a victim to some queer habits. He used to bare himself before women. The woman scavenger who did the cleaning at our place had complained to Saranga about it. Her daughter worked at Majhhale Rai's place. She said that Ranjan Babu was always looking for opportunities to bare himself before her daughter. Once her daughter had even thrown a mop at him. 'I took her severely to task for doing that: hitting the master's son! No matter how he behaves, he's still the master. But do have a thought for us! We too have some honour! A young girl, barely fourteen years, a vassal – if this is how our masters are to treat us, who will save us?'

It's possible that the news reached Majhhali Chachi's ears too. Fire and character are two things you don't need to light up with a flashlight to see: they are quite self-evident. Chachi started nagging Majhhale Chacha to get Ranjan married, but neither in Chachi's nor in Chacha's caste could any girl be found. Ever since it had become known that Ranjan was an orphan adopted by Krishna Rai, no one was ready to entertain the thought of giving their daughter in marriage to him. The bonds of caste and tradition were simply too strong. Majhhale Rai was at a loss and didn't know where to find a bride for him. Even so, both of them – Majhhale Chacha and Majjhali Chachi – were putting up a brave front. Majhhale Rai would retort, making no bones about the matter: 'A child is a child, no matter who the parents. When I decided to adopt Ranjan, I knew I'd have to face these problems, and I'm ready to face them. Do you think, with all the land and property that I own, I couldn't have got a child to adopt from our own fraternity, had I so wished ? People were begging me to adopt their sons, but I had decided to adopt this child. I have absolutely no regrets.' Sometimes people were more direct. 'Suppose,' they said, 'we were to give our daughter to your son, what guarantee is there that your brothers and their sons would not stake a claim to your property?' He tried to tell them that he had already nominated

Ranjan the heir to his property, but that did not convince anyone. Furthermore, it was also pointed out that this may well apply to 'your own' property but what about ancestral property?

The solution to this knotty problem that finally occurred to Majhhale Rai was to get a no-claim certificate from his brothers. First, he called on Bade Rai. He came and touched his feet. You could've knocked Bade Rai down with a feather ! All this while Majhhale Rai had been cutting Bade Rai dead even at chance meetings. The feet-touching set Bade Rai's alarm bells ringing. Krishna Rai in the haveli ! Touching his feet ! It must be a big favour he wants. Otherwise, would he be seen anywhere near the haveli, let alone touching his feet? Bade Rai let his hand rise in benediction, but also fired his question:

'What brings you to Hari Rai today? Something very special, I suppose.'

'Have been worried about you a lot lately. It has been ages since I saw you.'

Bade Rai laughed: 'You shouldn't worry about me too much; I have no plans to leave on my last journey yet. And when I do, I shall send word to you. Now let me know what brings you here.'

Majhhale Rai was left without an escape route. He had to come to the point.

'You know, Bade Bhaiya, Ranjan is now grown up. I wish to see him married. I didn't listen to you then, now I'm facing problems. Everyone I approach has the same question for me. Suppose, they say, we let you have our daughter in marriage, what guarantee can you give us that your brothers and their inheritors will not stake a claim to your property? What do I tell them?'

'What's there to worry about? You have adopted your son legally. The property goes to him without question.'

'I understand that, but they don't accept it. They want no-claim certificates from my brothers and their legal heirs.'

Bade Rai picked up paper and pen, then thought for a minute and put them down again. The sudden gleam that had lighted up Majhhale Rai's face went out the moment he put his pen down.

'I assure you that nither Bhaskar, nor Raghubar, nor anyone else will so much as look at your property. They'll starve to death,

but they'll not look at your property.'

'I fully understand that, but how do I make them understand it ?'

'And what'll you do if even the certificates don't satisfy them ?'

'I'll cross the bridge when I come to it.'

'Why don't you cross it now? The people who raise these questions are marrying their daughter not to your son but to your land and your wealth. They place no trust either in you or in the Rai family. Take my advice, and find for your son a bride whose people have trust in you and your family.'

'But ...'

'No buts. I'd have given it to you in writing, but I feel that you are trying to convert their lack of trust in you into your lack of trust in me. You get your son married and I'll give you a firm no-claim certificate as soon as the marriage is over. I'll myself send it to you, or to bahu. If I give it to you now, I'll simply be putting a seal of confirmation on your mistrust of me. I can put up with a lot, but not with mistrust, through trust, I know, is the first casualty in such dealings.'

Majhhale Rai did not know at first how to react. Then he knew.

'Bade Bhaiya, I know you hate Ranjan. You don't wish to see him settled and happy. You have a big grudge against me and my family. I shall never set foot in this house again.'

Bade Rai got up and moved towards the door. At the door, he stopped once and said :

'Krishna, I know how your mind works. You're not capable of looking at it any other way. But you must live within the limits of your thinking, and I within mine. When you thought nothing of marrying outside your caste after the death of your first wife, when you adopted a child from another caste and again thought nothing of it, why do you want to return to your caste for the marriage of your son?'

Majhhale Rai was stumped. He had no answer to this question. He kept standing in the verandah even after Bade Rai had disappeared inside. The strangeness of the air around him and the

question that Bade Rai had thrown at him pulled him down like heavy weights hanging from his neck. It took him hours to make it to the gate, or so at least it seemed to him.

After Girwar's birth, Saranga took to the sick bed. She started getting fits. She would suddenly wake up in the middle of the night and start screaming. Patialawale Hakim was the considered to be a great medical man and a pulse reader. Stories of many miraculous cures had gained currency about him. In fact, he was taken to be the court of highest appeal for difficult medical cases. When all other cures failed, it was the Patialawala who ensured health. So he was called to examine Saranga. The haveli, however, still observed purdah. Notwithstanding the youngest bahu's rejection of the tradition, Saranga still respected it. She sat behind a curtain and extended her hand. The hakim read the pulse a few times.

The hakim was soon overtaken by strange circumstances and his treatment didn't last long. One morning, his patients arrived at his dispensary to find him gone. The house had been vacated. No one knew where he had gone. No one had ever known how many members his family had, or who they were. People reported hearing a female voice in the house occasionally; some thought it was the maid servant, others that it was the Begum herself. His hushed departure caused a lot of surprise and speculation. It was much later that it was discovered that he had gone over to Pakistan. This was quite a common phenomenon then. A Muslim had only to move house for the rumours to start that he had flown to Pakistan.

The *hakim* took Saranga's pulse and asked me :

'Is Begum your first wife, second or third?'

'Third,' I said.

'Any child from the first?'

'No. Two from the second – a son and a daughter.'

'Does Begum get along well with them?'

I hesitated a little. Hakimji sensed the problem and said :

'It doesn't matter. I can't get much from the pulse. I'll prescribe some tonics, but please talk to her and let her get rid of her mental tension. I can cure bodily fever, but the cure of mental fever needs

the joint efforts of the healer as well as the one to be healed.'

The medicines were got ready. After much grinding and straining, they were handed over to Saranga, but instead of improving, she got worse. At the end of one month, the medicines were all finished, but left no trace in the patient. In the meanwhile, another complication had arisen. She would awake from sleep now and then and start crying. She would insist that some woman had snatched her child away from her, and was roasting it alive. The description she gave of the woman matched Kala, which was extremely surprising as she had never seen Kala. Nor was any photograph of Kala around. The child was sometimes a girl, at other times a boy. After this, she was also subjected to some voodoo medicine. What surprised me most was her ability to describe in detail the appearance of a person she'd never seen. Could it be that Kala's spirit was pursuing Saranga?

This development made a deep impression on Raghubar, but he reacted in a strange manner. He stopped going into the family quarters altogether. Someone among the servants had told him that the woman Bahuji talked about was his dead mother. This also perturbed Sona a great deal. Saranga would never let Girwar out of her sight. Those days we always had one or the other *voodoo* doctor camping in the haveli carrying out exorcism. Every Juma night, offerings were made at the river; elaborate Propitiation ceremonies were performed at Diwali. The basic problem was how to expel the woman and her kids from Saranga's dreams. After every exercise in exorcising them, they disappeared from her dreams for a few days, and the exorcist would start congratulating himself and making tall claims : 'I've cast the bloody woman into the ground and fixed her firmly in place with a stake. Never'll she be able to rise again,' 'I cast her sons in *Bhairab Baba's* begging bowl, and Bhairab Baba made a meal of them. No way they can come back again !' But the woman would be back in a few days in Saranga's dreams, and restart her routine of belabouring her and her son. She would start alone, but would soon be joined by her kids, who had apparently been regurgitated by *Bhairab Baba.*

And once again the peace of the house would be shattered.

Through all this, Sona was a silent spectator. Maybe because she now stood alone; also because she was now a mature girl. Though she didn't speak out, she was often crying to herself. On her knees, hands folded, she would pray to her departed mother : 'Mother, you are a witness. Call me to you ! Do not leave me to suffer in this hell. Our new mother curses us day in and day out. Raghubar doesn't have to put up with it because he is never here. Our Chhoti Dādī is gone too and Buā comes ever so rarely.' She no longer opened her mouth, either to Saranga or to me. However, she had now a room to herself, which was a great blessing. She spent all her time there, poring over her books. Saranga was often mad with her too. Several times I tried to find out from Sona if her new mother had been taking her medicines regularly, but, though she knew it, she never told me that she had been throwing them into the garbage bin. She always remained tight-lipped, neither confirming nor denying it.

One night, while still in sleep, Saranga pushed Girwar off the bed. There was a carpet on the floor, so Girwar wasn't hurt, but he bawled and bawled. I woke up to find him lying on the floor. Sona too came running. Saranga's breathing was abnormal and her eyes glazed. Sona picked up Girwar. I splashed water on Saranga's face, and she regained consciousness quickly. The first thing she said was 'My son ...!' And then she saw Sona holding her son and started screaming : 'It was a girl – yes, exactly this big, and a woman; the woman was running away with my child. And then she threw my child to the ground. Suddenly there was smoke, so much smoke. I couldn't see a thing.'

Sona tried to explain things to her; 'No. Chhoti Ma, Bhaiya fell off the bed. He was crying, so I came running.'

'No it was that woman. She threw him to the ground. And you were with her!'

Sona was now trembling. I tried to set things right and explained to Saranga : 'That's not correct. Girwar was lying on the floor ...'

But she was screaming ceaselessly : 'That woman will devour me and my son ... Remove her from my sight.' She meant Sona.

Bade Rai had been awakened by the racket. He had never

entered the family quarters at night ever since my mother had died, but that night he did. He had heard Saranga screaming. He stood outside the door and called out to me :

'What's the matter, Bhaskar ?'

'She had a nightmare again. Says that woman was dragging her son away. There was a girl with her. She thinks it was Sona.'

Bade Rai raised his voice :

'Bahu is getting worse day by day. She's losing all sense of propriety. She doesn't know what to say about whom. Take the night train to Agra tomorrow and admit her to the mental hospital there. The Civil Surgeon was telling me there is no such disease; nor are there any spirits which enter the body. It is all imagination : one imagines things, is terrified of them, and then imagines worse things. This circle must be broken, if she is to get well. These people break this circle with electric shocks.' Saranga heard all this.

I didn't believe my ears. Bade Rai turned on his heels and, without waiting for a word from me, walked away. Sona had put the child on the bed and returned to her room where she was crying inconsolably. Bhavani was trying to comfort her. Saranga sat stunned. Girwar's screams had subsided.

As I entered the room, she asked me :

'Is Bade Rai throwing me out of the house?'

'No. Only sending you to Agra for treatment.'

'I won't go.'

'Seems Bade Rai has made all the arrangements. He has consulted the doctors. It seems that's the only place where this disease can be treated.'

'Never. I'll never, never go there. It's that woman. She's throwing me out of my own house. You're all in league with her.'

For whatever reason, I now felt that Saranga was overstepping the limits. I told her bluntly :

'Look, Saranga, if you don't stop this woman business, I'll have no choice except to take you to Agra and put you in the mental hospital. You pushed the child off the bed, and you're blaming it on some woman of your dreams. That's crazy. We must get this woman out of your head, and that's the only way to do it. The woman you talk about died a long time ago. You have crossed

the limits today – you've said terrible things to Sona, and to me. If that's the way you're going to be, I'll be left with no alternative except. . .

Suddenly, Saranga crumbled. She grabbed my feet and was convulsed by a fit of hiccups. She sobbed :

'Don't, please don't send me there. I'll never say anything again about anyone. They'll kill me. . . Please don't. . .'

A full-grown young man, Raghubar now found the confines of the house too constricting. He also didn't get along with Sona. Sona envied him his freedom to roam around freely while she had to stay confined to the cramped quarters of the *zenana*. She had not been able to make friends with anyone either. She didn't get very far at school and continued studies at home, which precluded the possibility of new friends. This gave rise to a sort of sibling antagonism between the two. Every time Raghubar set foot in the house, there was a slanging match. He would tell her not to touch his food, and she got mad. Raghubar had also made friends with a girl, which was another topic on which he invited comments from Sona. 'Why do you get jealous? Sit tight at home. What's it got to do with you?'

Their relations would be soured for a time. But when alone, each one thought of the other. Raghubar thought : My only sister. Without friends. Lonely. No love lost with new mother. Always waiting for me. And when I am home, what do I do? I pick up a fight! What's wrong with me? Sona thought likewise about him. Why does Raghubar pick up fights with me? Why can't I put up with him? Why do I keep challenging him? Isn't he my brother, born of the same mother? How much did mother crave to see him, but died before she could. I wish I had died with her too. Am I jealous of my brother? But isn't he horrible to chase that girl while he can't spare a single sweet word for me? I'm his sister, after all, his own flesh and blood. Who is she? Is she closer to him than I am? The flesh-and-blood relationship was riding Sona and overriding the relationship of love.

Each of them felt hurt by his/her own behaviour towards the other, yet neither let any opportunity of hurting the other slap.

Because of this tension between the two, or maybe for some other reason, Saranga was relatively subdued. She worked hard at the appearance of Girwar : he always had to look princely. Bade Rai too doted on Girwar. The difference in their approaches surfaced only when Raghubar got a new piece of clothing, or a new pair of shoes which Girwar didn't. Saranga took it as a sign of bias against her son. Bade Rai, on the other hand, took Saranga's reaction as a sign of female cantankerousness and made no secret of his displeasure at it.

Every now and then a storm shook the sanctum of the haveli—the sanctum which included Saranga, Sona, Reghubar, the rest of the household, and me too in part. Sometimes the waves it caused also made their impact felt outside the sanctum boundaries. Bade Rai usually absorbed these waves quietly and intervened only when they threatened to overwhelm everybody. Neither of the old buffers, Chhote Rai or Rahmatullah, were around any more. I was there, but I was more like a piece of rag caught between those two grinding wheels than a buffer.

Raghubar was undergoing a transformation. He was developing an attitude of rejection towards everything. The first victim of this attitude was the rule of discipline which he had been trained to respect from the very childhood. This change in him frightened me. Bade Rai was growing old, Raghubar was in the full bloom of his youth, and I was sandwiched between the two. There are two possible destinies of a human sandwich : either his existence is squeezed out, or he expands and overgrows everything on either side of him. My destiny was beginning to resemble the former very closely.

Gandhi was dead. In fact, many people thought he died the day the country was divided. Those responsible for the division of the country were not very different from Godse himself. In our house, Bade Rai was dying slowly. Everything in the house had been divided. It may be a country or a household, when it gets divided against the wishes of the head of the family, life and death are

no longer so different any more. The country had been partitioned. Gandhi was dead. The persons in power were busy feathering their nests at the cost of the country. When Gandhi died, everyone wept, even Bade Rai. Raghubar had then said that when one old man meets his death, other old men begin to count their days. Once he had been an organic part of Bade Rai's sensibility. Reciprocally, Bade Rai had been an organic part of his. And now he was spinning farther and farther away from him. Every single action of his now hastened the final break-up of Bade Rai. His hopes, which Bade Rai had once pinned on Arun, were now pinned on Raghubar. He saw Raghubar as the Rai who would finally bring back the lost glory of the Rais. He imagined people pointing out Raghubar and saying : 'That's the grandson of Hari Rai, son of Bhaskar Rai, the saviour of the Rai destiny!' And then he thought of Gandhi— of the man whom he had always considered a crackpot and soft in the head. Does this man, he had always said, this man who thinks he can cure diseases by applying mudpaste, who drinks goat milk, does he think he can liberate the country from the clutches of the British by spinning a wheel? But now he thought of Gandhi, and he read his own thoughts in him. He too must have had great hopes from his heirs apparent like me. He too must have hoped that his heirs apparent would take the freedom he had gifted them to new heights of glory, and spread his word throughout the world. But even in his own lifetime, they had started floating like leaves in water, each in his own direction, and Gandhi had begun sinking like an overloaded ship. When he thought of this, he also thought of Raghubar. He of course never thought of me. He was alw thinking of what Arun had done, or what Raghubar was going to do, Girwar being too young yet to do anything. I was neither expected to be able, nor was able, to do anything. Although, strangely, I was the only one doing everything! Moreover, the conditions in which I was now 'doing everything' were very different from the conditions in which in the past I had done everything. Then I did everything for Bade Rai alone. By doing it for him I did it for everyone else too, for everyone stood and fell with him. The resources were in plenty. Now the resources were

gone and there were three generations to provide for. Somewhere between those two were the three of us : myself, Saranga and Girwar.

I was also now getting disgusted with Bade Rai's paramount worry : Will Raghubar, or won't he, be able to carry forward the name of Bade Rai? After all, what's a name any more than an entry in the official records? And, in the official records, I was his heir and he my father. The worry about the name should therefore have been mine. Bade Rai was my father, but who was I? No more than a creaking bridge that joined the two shores, one foaming and frothing, the other ebbing by the day!

Partition, riots, independence— Raghubar had crossed all these watersheds, and now stood at a high point of life where family, household, elders, young relatives and the rest had no meaning or relevance for him. Home was more like a hotel, the people living there like inmates of the hotel of passing familiarity— and that was all. He came into the house, had his meals and strode out. We watched him come and we watched him go. Bade Rai drew in a long, long breath and held his peace. Sometimes he did speak out : 'What do you think you are doing to yourself, Raghubar? Why are you bent upon ruining your life?' Normally, he did not reply to such questions, and, if he did, used no more than a few words : 'No such thing.' 'I know what's best for me. Please don't worry.' These replies left Bade Rai, and me too, seething with impotent rage.

Raghubar had no interest in studies whatsoever. This often became a cause of friction between him and Sona. He would then stop talking to her for a few days. Finally it was Sona who would have to bend. The growing years of Raghubar were the time when I realized that daydreaming was not an occupation for adolescents only; fairly elderly adults also indulged in it. Bade Rai and me- – both often sat lost in reverie : Our hard days are at an end. Nothing to worry about any more! A matter of days, and Raghubar would be grown up. End of all our troubles. Arun might be a big man today, but Raghubar would be bigger. In fact, one of these days, we might even all come together again! I used to include Majhhale

Rai and Ranjan too in the reunion even if Bade Rai didn't. Then I thought maybe Gandhi also thinks the same, not only thinks but possible sees it actually happening : Those who went over and those who came over are all coming together in a grand union! Of course, that never actually came about; in fact we saw to it that it doesn't come about. But I, for one, never gave up my dreams : we're all together and the happy days are here again! If it was the Lāt who came to dinner earlier, it'll be the ministers now.

Bade Rai had a keen desire to meet Jawaharlal. Once he even wrote to him. The letter was acknowledged by his secretary : 'The Prime Minister would have been delighted to meet you, but unfortunately preoccupation with the affairs of the state leaves him with no time. He greatly appreciates the feelings you have expressed and sends you his good wishes.' Bade Rai had never been treated like this even by the British! What good are good wishes if he can't even see me, he thought. Thinking that the country was now independent, he'd got Raghubar to write the letter in Hindi. The acknowledgement that came was in English.

Bade Rai was depressed over this incident for several days. One day I suggested to him that he might write to Jagan Babu. It was just possible that he might arrange a meeting with Jawaharlal. But Bade Rai did not say anything. When I repeated the suggestion, he said : 'No. The matter ends with the reply received.' A little later, he added : 'Let's not expect from others what our actions towards them do not warrant.'

I grasped his meaning. He hadn't forgotten. The pupils of his eyes had frozen into two mercury balls and rolled about in their sockets : this way and that, this way and that.

Raghubar had grown into a gangling youth. He was groping and didn't know which road to take. Studies were not his cup of tea. Schools and colleges in the post-Independence period had undergone a revolutionary change. There were student unions and elections to the student unions. The unions had elected legislative bodies and office bearers. Students discussed their problems in the meetings of these bodies and presented their demands to the

Principal. Teachers no longer functioned as intermediaries and therefore could be said to have become partisans. Raghubar was also getting drawn into these affairs. He had already contested a few minor elections. As a result, his interest in studies had declined further. Ranjan had quit college after repeated failures in each class— sometimes as many as three or four times. And he cast his shadow on Raghubar.

Bade Rai disliked this business of elections and unions. How do you expect the students to study if you introduce politics in colleges, he argued. Do you think the British were fools? Had there been anything to gain from such a system, wouldn't the British have introduced it? When Bade Rai saw ministers and members of legislative assemblies going round in khadi dresses, he was put out and would start comparing them with the officers of the British government. Is this the way to rule, he asked. To rule, you must learn to be an officer, you must exercise authority, establish command and exude fear. You cannot rule without fear. An officer who inspires no fear is like a diamond which exudes no sparkle. The officer's pen must be forceful, his voice authoritative, his personality magisterial. He was disappointed. Gandhi, the loin-clothed fakir, he could forgive since he was a saint, but what about this rabble? Why can't they live like officers? All his images had been shattered— of ministers as well as officers. Once he called on an old friend of his, Shivdasani ICS, and was startled to see him dressed in a *bandgalā* jacket in place of the regular officer's suit, looking like a bandmaster. Bade Rai himself was old and ragged. The majesty of his person was a thing of the past.

Shivdasani was quickly off the mark :

'What's with you, Mr Hari Rai? Are you the same man who pulled our senior, Vir Bahadur, out of the jaws of certain conviction by his forceful defence?'

Bade Rai laughed. 'Mr. Shivdasani, I can't even defend myself now. But what's this you are wearing?'

He too laughed and said : 'Rai Sahib, we're civil servants. We neither bare our teeth nor show our hand unless there's a very good reason to do so. We served that government then, we're serving

this one now.' He paused a little and then continued : 'But I know your agony. It's hard for you to change now. You've been too independent within the bounds of your choice.'

This was Bade Rai's first and last meeting with an officer-friend after Independence. His old friends still passed through the town, but he never called on anyone. Nor did they call on him. This pinched Bade Rai. People who once used to rush to meet him, now avoided his gaze. Bade Rai was convinced that he was no more than an empty dish. Were it full, every dog would make a beeline for it. Since it was empty, they just sniffed from a distance and sidled away. It was his old sense of decency that prevented him from bringing this truth to his lips.

He had now stopped dreaming about Raghubar. The question that now bothered him was a different one. The zamindari was now almost finished. The few remaining vestiges would also disappear with me. The horses were all gone, only some milch cattle were remaining. The once glittering walls of the haveli were now streamed with mould and mildew. So the question was : Even if someday Raghubar managed to stand on his own two feet, what would he achieve? Suppose he did succeed in becoming an officer, what sort of an officer would he make : the new khadi and *bandgalā* variety or the old regular type? Then he also thought of Majhhale Rai. He too had been an officer! Sometimes he even thought of Raghubar as a minister. After all, his māmā was an important dignitary in the party! Bade Rai hated the idea of his becoming a minister, but you never knew! Raghubar too was bitten by the simplicity bug. When Bade Rai thought of Raghubar's studies, the castle of his dreams came tumbling down. Our times had been different. Your prestige depended on your lineage, not on your scholaristic achievements. But the wind was now blowing the other way. It was studies, studies all the way. When Bade Rai felt everything slipping through his fingers, he tried to reason with Raghubar, sometimes tried to cajole him and even shouted at him. Having seen the golden day of the Rai family, dire imaginings of its calamitous future haunted him. Deep inside me, I too was

contending with these issues, but I was somewhat detached. In those days, I arranged feasts and banquets; now I devoted my energies to providing two square meals to everyone while keeping up the appearances. For me the thought of the dire future of the Rai family was of course a frightening one, but not as frightening as it was to Bade Rai. The reason : I knew that when Time makes its demands on him, Raghubar too will come to his senses, as I had done!

A victim of strained resources and Raghubar's idleness, the once high-flying house of the Rais was gradually sinking to the ground like a leaky balloon. The only source of income was farming. Everything depended on it. I rode my bicycle to the fields. As I did so, I was often reminded of the times when I owned the only bicycle in the whole town. People ran helter-skelter when they saw the bicycle coming, then stood aside, watching the spinning wheels of the bicycle. Now there was a crush of cyclists on the road. In the initial days, when the Rai downturn started, I tried to hide myself whenever I saw a coach on the road lest I might be recognised. I was afraid of people cluck-clucking their tongues and saying : 'Poor Rais! So hard up! The last horse gone too!' But in a few days, I had lost myself in the crowd of cyclists. All day I stood in the fields getting them ploughed. Sometimes, I had to take to the plough myself. The first few days, the people around me tried to stop me. 'How can we let you touch the plough?' they said. But soon they got used to seeing me push it, and in another few days even began to look at me expectantly, hoping that I would help them out now and then. But I took to the plough only when I was inclined to do so.

Saranga's petulance over Girwar was on the rise. She bore the grudge that everyone in the house favoured Raghubar, and all the goodies were showered on him alone. Bade Rai had still not lost hope : in some deep corner of his heart, he still nursed the hope that someone someday would save the Rai boat from sinking—and the man to do it would be Raghubar. But this certainly did not mean that Girwar was neglected. Since Raghubar went to college, and called on important people, he was provided with clothes, shoes,

etc. more than any one else. Girwar too got them but naturally not in the same quantity. This was not satisfactory to Saranga, and she would get raging fits over the issue. During these fits she would start hitting or abusing Girwar : 'You should have died in the cradle, you wretch! Who wanted you here? If you had to be born, you should have found another mother. Why did you choose my cursed womb? People shower love even on motherless kids; here I'm still alive and yet no one has a thought for my kid!' Sona usually kept her mouth tightly shut, but sometimes she could bear it no more and would offer a mild comment like 'Why do you say that? Do you think we don't love Girwar? He too will get whatever he needs when he is Raghubar's age and will have whatever Raghubar has today.' But this only added fuel to the fire. Saranga would get madder and start cursing Sona too : 'Why should you care? You'll get married and be gone. I and this wretch will be left here to roast. All that you are all good for is to stoke the fire that burns within me!' This only left Sona in tears.

I did all I could to make Saranga understand. 'Stop using this kind of language,' I told her 'My child! Your child!' What do you think you're going to gain by talking like this? You'll only lose Girwar and, of course, never regain Raghubar. Don't you want to keep at least one of them? Sona is already out anyway.' But she never gave a damn for what I said. The only saving grace in the whole affair was that Girwar loved Sona and Raghubar deeply, and so did they.

Before the fish die in the river, the water changes its colour. Then it becomes poisoned. This was what was happening to our family. Everyone was affected; everyone was losing his/her grip. Those with a strong constitution plodded on in silence, Bade Rai most of all, though his constitution was no longer what it used to be.

Raghubar had entered the B.A. class after having failed the Intermediate Examination twice. This was an occasion for celebration as well as despair. Celebration, because he had finally overcome the Intermediate hurdle; despair, because one wondered

where this rate of progress would take him, and when? Already he had distanced himself from home. He put in an appearance only at meal times. Bade Rai had now hardly any business outside, and not very much at home either. Once in a while, some documents relating to the fast-vanishing zamindari would need his attention; or there would be a sudden crisis somewhere, and he would have to go and call on some officer or the other, or some political leader or the other. The rest of the time, which was most of the time, he spent waiting for Raghubar.

Sometimes I would be late returning from the fields. It was then that I felt the full extent of his concern for me. He would either be watching the gate, or pacing about in the courtyard. The memory of the incident that had taken place with Majhhale Rai years ago would start agitating him. The moment my bicycle entered the courtyard, he would suddenly stop pacing about and his gaze would pick me up at the gate. Aware of his gaze, I slowed down my bicycle, its wheels whistling to a stop. Raghubar might not have held him in awe, but I still did. He would retire to his room before I could approach him. I knew what was in store for me and made up my mind to use silence as my defence, no matter what he said. Sometimes this defence worked, at other times, it didn't. When it didn't, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut, both of us went without dinner.

His usual plea would be : 'Why can't you leave your place of work an hour earlier? How much can you get done in an hour? Or is it that both of you now think I'm a senile old man who has lost all reason?'

'What makes you think that?' I'd ask.

'Your thinking and your behaviour makes me think that. Here I am, ready to bid goodbye forever any moment, and you would still not listen to me! What am I going to do if something happens to you?' And he would be back to his original question. 'After all, why is it so difficult for you to leave an hour earlier? It was different when you had a coach. The *sāīs* and the *charkatā* were always with you. Now all that you have is a bicycle. A bicycle!'

Raghubar would never have let such questioning pass, but I

tried and kept quiet. But a prolonged silence on my part only helped to give an edge to his voice : 'Has the cat got your tongue?' he would shout.

Sometimes it did get me. Here I am, I would say to myself, dog-tired after a full day's work and the old man refuses to let go to me! 'How can I quit work half way?' I would retort. 'I have to explain things to the workers; I have to listen to what they have to say. If I abandon work, how do you think the expenses of this place are going to be met?'

He would get mad and start hitting his head : 'So it's all because of me!' he would cry. This was one of his latest habits, either born of over-excitement, or of a realization of his increasing helplessness. The times when his piss could set the ground afire were returning to make faces at him. One born of his loins now dared to meet his eye! The latest and the greatest sorrow of his life!

Bhavani was Raghubar's greatest friend as well as his greatest enemy. Throughout the day, Bade Rai was firing off inquiries about Raghubar : 'Is he home yet?' Since Bhavani was the one who hovered around him most of the time, it was he who answered the queries. His answer depended on the prevailing state of his relations with Raghubar. If everything was fine, he would fob off Bade Rai with a suitable excuse : 'Yes, he was here. Has just left for his friend's place with his books. Plans to study there.' Bade Rai looked at him and kept quiet. It was unlikely that he was convinced. He was far too worldly-wise for that and didn't need to be told everything. The more it had been his attempt to keep the future under his tight control, the more he had found the present slipping through his closed fist. He was beginning to realize it, but refused to believe it. When Bhavani was unhappy with Raghubar, or wanted him punished for his repeated disregard of orders, he would instead say : 'Who knows where he may be? Must be sitting in a movie hall.' Movies were anathema to Bade Rai, and the result would be that Raghubar would find the doors of forgiveness closed on him for the day. A severe tongue-lashing followed. He at once

knew that the real culprit was Bhavani Kākā, and the two would stay away from each other for a few days. But there was no way Raghubar could survive for long without the goodwill of Bhavani. Ever since the revenue staff of the haveli had left, Bhavani controlled the purse-strings of the haveli. Every morning, a certain amount was handed to him, and he paid out throughout the day, meeting all the expenses. In the evening, he submitted the accounts. Raghubar, Girwar, Sona, Saranga, even I got our money from him whenever we needed any. Actually, even Bade Rai. Raghubar, of course, was totally dependent on him. That was the reason the tension between them never lasted very long.

Bhavani knew of Bade Rai's disappointment with Raghubar. He knew that by his behaviour Raghubar had poured cold water on all Bade Rai's hopes, and that Bade Rai couldn't see a single ray of hope anywhere. The entire horizon was now enveloped in darkness. It had been like this when Arun returned from England. At that time, Raghubar had flashed like a star on a dark horizon, even though he was too small then. Bade Rai had then hoped that Raghubar would bring back the glory and would scatter the clouds gathered on the horizons. At least the clouds on his mental horizons had been scattered by this hope, but what now? He couldn't centre his hopes on Girwar : he was too young still, too young for Bade Rai to witness his full rise in his lifetime. Whatever little hope there was was centred on Raghubar. Who could say— a miracle may occur one day and a bright light may revoke the all-pervading darkness!

Although I didn't let it be known, in the heart of my hearts, I too thought of Raghubar as my only hope. For one thing, his intelligence was far above what I would have ever attributed to him; for another, he was a man of awareness. And of course he had the gift of the gab. I could, therefore, sometimes see a ray of hope gleaming in his eyes, but it disappeared the very next moment. Whenever they were together, I also found Girwar looking up to him, all his hopes centred on him. People who're always looking up to others can never look up to themselves, a lesson I had learnt from experience. Raghubar too loved Girwar, but it was a silent,

speechless love. In fact, sometimes I wondered if it was my fatherly affection that was playing tricks with me— an overdose of fatherly affection possibly.

There was something else that I would never tell anyone, and in fact never did tell anyone, and that was that I saw in Raghubar the profundity of character that I would seen in Kala. Like Kala, he was a person of few words; and a good listener. He displayed the same imaginative power. Kala had to take a lot from the others— by way of actions. That was probably why I asked myself : Am I trying to make up to her by splurging myself on him? All her life, his mother had denied herself so that others in the family, my family, could be happy. It is true that everyone had to do it then, women more than others. Things were different now. I couldn't help thinking of Arun and his wife. Arun's wife used to say flatly : 'Those times are dead when women used to die bit by bit everyday. Now everyone has a right to a full life— be it a woman or a man. No one can change that now!'

Although at that time this remark of hers sounded odd and a bit wordy, it now seems she wasn't wrong. Sona was another example. She had to live with Saranga, so she had created a world for herself. She tried not to stir out of this world, nor to let anyone into it. Children playing kabaddī jump into the opponent's court, but finding themselves unchallenged sometimes return, their breath spent, to their own side. Sona too wanted to go into Saranga's court, but every time she did, she was, for some reason, met only with indifference.

Raghubar's silence in matters pertaining to himself was deepening by the day. Had he spoken, that would have been a trial for me. But he didn't speak and that too was a trial for me. On the days when I was off work, I used to call him, have him sit by my side, and talked to him. 'Off work' means I had not gone to work in the fields— either because I was unwell, or because I was goofing off. In fact, farming is an occupation that does not allow you to go off work : 'off work' here means 'off everything.' My sole purpose in talking to him was to find out his intentions : what was it he

was planning to do in life? But all my questions were met with stony silence. Silence is a weapon which, whether or not it achieves anything else, does succeed in making the other person feel helpless. So it was with me. After I had tried everything— annoyance, cajolery, shouting, abusing, persuasion- – I was finally made to feel helpless, utterly helpless. Then I sometimes lost all self-control and said things which I ought not to have said. After every such outburst, I had to report to Bade Rai. I still felt myself bound by the same ties of discipline that constrained me in the days when Bade Rai was Bade Rai. He would then tell me : 'Bhaskar, in your time, you too made mistakes. Did I ever react the way you did today? Losing self-control in anger is a sign that there's something lacking in you. It damages your confidence in yourself. I too could have lost my temper with you, and subjected you to the harshest punishment. Raghubar is now grown up— whether you like it or not. He wants room to grow. You cannot stop a mountain spring once it leaves the mountains and bursts into the open plains. Hills, plateaus, land- – they must all give way to it; if they don't, it will make its way through them even if it has to stop momentarily. But our paths are now getting blocked one after another. We are losing, if we haven't already lost, the pathbreaking energy of our younger days. We have reached the dead end, and one day we shall vaporize from the very spot where we stand. You still have some time. Though you may not break a new path like him, you'll still watch him climb up, roll down, run or walk on flat plains, yell and squeak like children at play at every turn. You'll point him out to others and you'll say : 'Look! That's my son. You see where he is? I could never have thought of reaching there myself.' there was a time when I too thought these thing— about Arun. But when he reached the tip, he disappeared from my sight. And I turned my eyes to Raghubar. I know he is Bhaskar Rai's son, and only Bhaskar Rai holds the rights over him. I didn't want to transplant my dreams into you : few such dreams take roots, fewer still flourish. But I wanted to see them in your eyes, nevertheless. Now I feel neither of us will see them fulfilled. But I have not lost hope. You, on the other hand, are quick to lose it. Or you

wouldn't keep shouting at him for every little thing, even for nothing at all.

Such talk caused me deep pain. I saw him as a man with multiple wounds on his body, blood-spattered and groaning in pain. I felt as if I too had those wounds on my body. He was like Rana Sanga, raring for a fight, but losing to Time. Bade Rai too had lost to Time, and partly to himself, and had lost so badly that suffering and pain were his only destiny now. All those who had once been pillars of strength for him, with whose support he had fought the battle of his life, had made good their escape. I was the only one left, and he had never counted me as one of his soldiers. Another was Raghubar. Girwar was still too young. Among women,. there were Saranga and Sona. Sona waited for the door to her own independent destiny to open, and I knew that the day it opened, she would be off thundering like a rushing mountain stream.

Raghubar soon reached another watershed of his life. We found out about it rather belatedly, and we were all shaken. I had a friend Ramvir, who was better known as Rame Babu. He had returned home after long years of government service elsewhere. He visited me pretty frequently. His visiting hours started after dinner and continued till ten o'clock. I didn't mind his visits during the long summer days, but in winters it was not a very welcome routine. I used to be tired after the day's slog and very sleepy. He would go on chatting while I hemmed and hawed. He had only one child—a daughter called Seema, almost the same age as Raghubar. Though shy, Raghubar had become friendly with her, and was now a regular caller at Rame Babu's place. Having served in high positions, Rame Babu ran a modern household where there were no restrictions on boys socialising, sitting around and chatting with his daughter. When they started, Raghubar's visits were fortnightly, or at most weekly, but when he sensed that Seema welcomed his visits, the frequency went up till it became a daily occurrence. While Rame Babu sat with me at our place, Raghubar would be sitting with his daughter at his.

This development changed Raghubar's life-style altogether.

Earlier, he was never at home; now he was home early in the evening. He would spend some time talking to others, or being generally friendly all round, and then he would start grooming himself. He would have a bath, put on a change of clothes and shoes and smarten himself up. This greatly pleased Bade Rai. Bade Rai shared the view that an important obligation of the upper classes was to greet the evening well-groomed and tastefully attired. When Raghubar stepped out of the house in the evening *a la* an upper class gentleman, Bade Rai saw the hope that the disbalance of his personality was undergoing a correction. Such a correction in one part of one's personality automatically extends itself to other parts in due course of time. As a matter of fact, no one stepping into youth can escape undergoing such a correction for a short while at least. Bade Rai could not help verbalizing his feelings on this matter on one or two occasions : 'May God teach our Raghubar the right manners!' But the moment he found out the secret behind the preening of Raghubar, viz. that it was followed by a daily visit to Rame Babu's house, where his daughter was scoring a daily rise in Raghubar's esteem index, our house was hit by a hurricane. The one who let the cat out of the bag was Sona. More recently, Sona had been finding it difficult not to notice a distinct rise in the level of Seema's curiosity about Raghubarl; in fact, she invariably succeeded in introducing topics in their conversations all of which, for one reason or another, led to the same end-result : exchanges about Raghubar. What were his study habits? Was he at all a victim of such habits? What time does he go to bed? What time does he leave it in the morning? What are his likings in food matters? And so on. When she talked about Raghubar, Seema's eyes sparkled with expectancy.

Raghubar too had recently acquired a new circular style of conversation with the circle always ending in Seema. He never ran out of things to praise in Seema— how deeply interested in studies, how soft-spoken, what courtesy, in other words, 'Why don't you invite her here more often, Sona?' Now Sona had seen more summers than him, and knew what the deal was. She replied with silence, or with an occasional 'H'm' or 'Yes,' hoping the matter

would pass. On one or two occasions, she even expressed her annoyance. This was when Raghubar was being starry-eyed about Seema's courteous manners. Sona tore into him most uncourteously: 'What do you take me for, Raghubar? I wasn't born yesterday! I go to her and listen to her going ga-ga over you, and you, who never had any time for me, come and lecture to me on her qualities—as all the courteous manners of the world are now mortgaged with Seema, as if I've never known any courtesy!' Raghubar would keep quiet, or would let the matter pass as a joke, since he didn't wish the matter to acquire any public exposure. But sometimes he too would get annoyed.

'What's biting you?' he'd ask Sona. 'If I call on her, or speak well of her, does that mean I'm running you down?' One day, this wrangling assumed rather serious proportions, and Sona blew the whistle. She unburdened herself to Saranga, to whom she had been feeling closer ever since Raghubar had started on his romantic career. Now both of them were joined in their antagonism to Raghubar, though for different reasons.

So far sona had not cared to keep a tab on Raghubar's movements, but now she made it her full time occupation. When he returned home, she would receive him warmly and loudly with : 'Oh, so you are back from Seema's. Good. Now come and have your dinner,' making sure everyone heard her.

Raghubar would be hungry, but, sore at Seema's verbal assault, he'd refuse dinner. Sona would promptly launch her second missile:

'Had dinner at Seema's place? Did she make it herself for you?'

He would get mad. 'Yes,' he'd say, 'Getting jealous, are We?'

'Why shouldn't I? You are my mother's son, not hers! If I don't speak out, who will?'

'You were never that way before.'

'Never had occasion to be.'

He would shut himself up in his room and go to bed. Now Sona would start feeling guilty. Maybe he hasn't eaten. She shouldn't have spoken that way to him. After all he is her brother. What comes over me when I see him? I feel as if Seema is pushing her

way into the house holding his hand and crowding me out. In a way, this was all in Sona's head. Seema addressed her as *Didi* (elder sister) and Saranga as *Taiji* (Wife of father's elder brother). I was the Tau (father's elder brother). Our family priest used to say: 'The Taus are at the root of most of the troubles of this country: think of Tāu Bhishma Pitāmah, Tāu Dhritarāstra, Tāu Vyāsa, Tāu. . .'

If ever I had a free hour, I too paid Rame Babu a visit. Seema always showed up to greet me and inquired about Raghubar : 'How's Raghubar?' Though the two were roughly the same age, I somehow didn't relish these inquries. Why can't she suffix 'bhaiya' or some such thing to his name? Why only 'Raghubar'? Something was certainly fishy.

Often it was on the tip of my tongue to say : 'Why don't you ask him? You see him everyday, don't you?' But I could never bring myself to say it. I either kept quiet, or made a roundabout reply like 'Only he can tell you that. We don't get to see him all day.'

Sometimes Seema seemed to me to be a very sensible girl. Specially when she said :

'But that's not right. He must pay attention to his studies.'

I laughed. 'Studies? Raghubar? Where does he have the time for studies with so many other things to do?'

Rame Babu may have been clairvoyant or something, for the would keep quiet, or would correct me :

'You are quite off the mark about Raghubar, Bhaskar Babu. Wait and see, he's going to make a big name for himself some day. Don't go by his present form. All children have these peaks and troughs, but there's life after them too!'

I read more in his comment than probably there was. To me it seemed as if it was his vested interest speaking. I wanted to say: 'You wouldn't understand. He has dashed all our hopes,' but then I realized the futility of such comments and the words stuck in my throat. Some words, however, did escape me if the context permitted it.

'Rame Babu,' I once told him, 'When your children, your

own children, set out to destroy all your hopes and ambitions systematically, one after another, the pain doesn't show on the face; it settles deep down inside you and it eats into you.'

'Have patience and wait,' was Rame Babu's sage advice.

'But think of Bade Rai. He waited for Arun, and what a long wait it was! What was the outcome? He's waiting again, and with patience. It remains to see where he ends up this time, at the hands of this great man.'

Rame Babu only smiled and said : 'We don't trust our own kids. For us, every newly hired servant is a thief, and every child graduating into youth is a misguided, directionless loafer. Haven't all of us been through this? In fact, what sometimes misguides them is this kind of thinking on our part. It's not always that we stop pulling at the reins and down they plunge into the abyss : they may well make it to their destination on their own. It's the feeling, the knowledge that there's someone behind us, watching us and holding us on a long rein, but a rein that can be pulled short at any time— that's the best rein. Yes, the fear of the rein being pulled short any time is the best rein. A good coachman does not pull at the rein : he only gives it a tug. So far as I can see it, Raghubar is a good boy. What he needs is not a harness, but assurance.'

We were not convinced. Rame Babu is only trying to ingratiate himself with him, we thought. Sona and Saranga were deeply perturbed about it. The womenfolk too often exchanged visits. Sona was usually reticent, but Saranga never let slip a chance to draw even. When, following her usual practice, Seema made her inquiry about Raghubar, she promptly retorted :

'There're so many of us at home— from the oldest to the youngest, yet you're worried only about him. What's so special about him, *bitiyā*?'

Seema would either slip away quietly, or let the matter ride. But if she felt hurt, she didn't give up :

'We're the same age, *Tāiji*, and we've grown up together. Who else is there in your house I can count as my childhood playmate? There is Sona didi, of course, but she's older to me.'

Saranga's sharp tongue didn't know when to stop. She would be quick to rejoin :

'O.K. So you've played together, but does that mean you have to stay together all you life? Or is that what you have in mind?'

At this point, Seema's mother found it necessary to intervene. She would first try to turn the whole thing into a joke, but if she failed to do so, she would say :

'I'm senior to you in age, though, of course, you have the seniority of relationship. That's why probably I can give you this advice. No point in tangling with these present-day youngsters. Times have changed. We live in different times. We cannot go back to being like them, nor can they become like us. Whatever they do will smack of the new, whatever we do will smack of the old. No way we can change it.'

But Saranga was like a double-edged sword. She quickly turned the tables on her opponent with

'These are no youngsters, I tell you. They could teach you and me a thing or two. Take our Raghubar. The world his beat, but not a moment to spare for his mother or his sister. Every other mother, a great mother; every other sister, a great sister; only we are the lousy ones, me and my daughter. Others may enjoy this show, but these are no fun and games for us : we have a son at stake, a son of the Rais.'

Provoked, Seema's mother would top the topper with an equally sharp rejoinder :

'Look here, *Dīdī*, others will always enjoy the show, if someone puts up one. In fact, even if one sits with one's eyes closed, they will still say you are enjoying the show, won't they? As for Raghubar, let me say he's one in a million. You may differ : after all, he is your son, and you know best. As for being a Rai, we're no beggars either.'

When Saranga saw the deal passing out of her hands, she would start losing her temper. All notions of friendship and kinship would be given the go-by, and she would stomp out of their house. Arriving at home, she would come down on me like a ton of bricks:

'He's dragging the Rai name through mud— that's what he's

doing, this Raghubar of yours! My Girwar may count, may not count, but he counts, doesn't he? And what does he do? He gangs up with that shameless bunch, and is bent on blowing up our prestige sky-high! They all fall in love, and they all fall out of it– but must their parents strike up the orchestra every time they do, and become their cheerleaders?'

On this issue, Sona was at one with Saranga. She looked upon Seema as her enemy. To think that there was a time when Seema could do no wrong and Raghubar made fun of her. 'Come on, *Dīdī*,' he used to say, 'Girls are simply girls. What's good or bad about them?'

And Sona got ruffled. 'And boys, I suppose, are not boys even when they are boys. Stiff like bamboo poles!'

Things were different now. Sides had been switched. It was the same Sona who now moaned : 'Nothing else matters to him now— only Seema and Seema's people.'

Raghubar did try to supply some clarifications and explanations about his position in the matter, but it did nothing to improve the situation. He asked the two of them :

'What's it that you hate? Is it Seema, or is it the fact that I visit her so often? If you're mad at me, give me whatever punishment you want to. Throw me out of the house. As far as Seema is concerned, you have already snapped your relationship with her, therefore you don't need to worry about her any more. I visit her because I have no reason to be annoyed with her— as you two have.'

This sent Sona into a crying fit, since she felt helpless before his arguments. One doesn't cry out of sorrow only, one also cries out of helplessness. Tart and acerbic, like the smoke that rises from neem-wood fire, are the tears of helplessness.

It all added up to one thing— Raghubar's isolation in the family. The issue had become so sensitive that even I and Bade Rai had stopped speaking to each other. Once or twice he did of course tell me : 'The light of this new age dazzles me. Let me close my eyes now.' The comment had made its way to my innermost being then.

Bade Rai was a very old man now, but Raghubar still slept in his room. One night, Bade Rai slipped on the stairs and fell. I'm quite sure the noise woke up Raghubar, but he didn't get up. Bade Rai somehow dragged himself to his bed. This came as a great shock to Bade Rai. 'When a man finds himself too weak to get up after a fall,' he told me one day, 'he should take it that his time is up.' It was Raghubar himself who, many years after Bade Rai's death, told me of this incident. We had got Bade Rai's will opened. He had written about all of us in the will. What had upset Raghubar was Bade Rai's statement : 'I blame no one for what has happened. It was my failure that I could not break free of my self-imposed constraints. Nor could I move with the times. Those who cannot bend have to break. Each new generation is a step ahead of the previous one, and more liberated. It is we who try to drag it backwards. It can't move backward, so it is natural that we ourselves trip and fall in the attempt. And when we do, there's no one around to give us a helping hand.'

We read the news item and reeled back as if a ferocious blast had struck us. We had long forgotten about it all. The report said Mr. Vir Bahadur had committed suicide at his bungalow. Mrs. Bahadur was not in the house then. He was alone. For the past few days he had not been his usual self. He had topped the I.C.S exam and was considered to be one of the ablest officers. He spent many years in suspension on a murder charge. Later, the Privy Council had given him an honourable acquittal, etc. etc.

The newspaper fell from Bade Rai's hands. He sat motionless for a time, muttering to himself. 'People think the big and the famous are happy, but everyone is a martyr to his own inner contradictions.' I was looking at him astonished. He never spoke to himself like this. This was a totally new thing with Bade Rai. It suddenly struck me that a suicide could set of a mushroom cloud of despair, a mushroom cloud bigger than the one set off by an atomic explosion, particularly if it is committed by a man of distinction.

I had travelled the larger course of my life, but Mrs. Bahadur's image— touching my cheeks, smiling at me— was still as fresh in my mind as it had always been. A smile stole into my lips, when I suddenly remembered that her husband had just committed suicide and this was no occasion for smiles. Bade Rai was restless and paced the room impatiently.

Vir Bahadur's father had died while the case was still in court. Vir Bahadur was out on bail. He made many attempts to see his father : he wanted to do penance and seek his forgiveness. But the thakur was unrelenting. He sent word : We continue to be father and son. God willing, we shall continue to be father and son in the next life too. This is not a passing relationship. When I sent you into the ICS, you were like a bright and shining star, spotless. Now it has a spot. My blessings, and all my property, are with you, but do not present yourself before me. I'll feel small. It'll test my patience. If I can save you in the court, I'll gladly sell all my property, and even myself, but I can't bear to see you like this— with this stigma on you. You killed a woman, a woman who was helpless, a woman who you were supposed to help. You've betrayed the trust placed on you; you have cheated on goods given to you for safekeeping— you have demeaned me so much that I can't face my *bahu* any more. On the day the thakur died, Vir Bahadur went up to the door, bowed his head in a *pranām* and came away.

Vir Bahadur's wife and kids were visiting his father then. Before he died, Thakur Sahib told his *bahu* : 'Look, bahu, I bear no grudge against Viru. He'll pay for what he did, in the next if not in this life. A man who loses control over himself can sink to any depth— any depth at all. But, all said and done, he's still my son. What he did has shamed our whole family; it has taken away my peace. People then said he 'belongs' to this family; now what he did will also 'belong' to this family forever. . . I'm nearing my end. I can neither forgive him, nor punish him. I can only pray to God to help him in the adversity that faces him.' He stopped for breath, then continued : 'So long as my friend, Hari Rai, lives,

think of him in my place. You can go to him, whenever you feel the need, with no hesitation and no second thoughts. About those who are one's own, one suffers from an ego- – that's what I did— for others, that ego changes into magnanimity. Hari Rai will do whatever he can for Viru, though he may not have done much for his own brother. You have no need for worry.'

The honourable discharge of Vir Bahadur by the Privy Council came only a few days after his death. The case was argued before the Council by a leading Allahabad lawyer. The lawyer's son was seriously ill. One night he had this visitation : 'Help a son in trouble and your son will be well again!' His son and Vir Bahadur had been in the same class at Allahabad. In his younger days, Bade Rai would have exploited this connection too, but now his dealings with the officialdom had declined somewhat. The entire ICS fraternity of the province had nevertheless pitched in with whatever assistance they could provide without it getting known. An important file relating to the case that could have damaged Vir Bahadur's case, thanks to this fraternity, disappeared without a trace. After his discharge, Vir Bahadur had been posted at the Lucknow Secretariat. His seniority was restored and he was given all his dues plus a compensation. The suicide had come nearly a year later.

Two days later, Bade Rai received an envelope in post. He looked at it and he knew. It was Vir Bahadur's hand. The newspaper report had said that the he had left behind three letters— one to a friend of his father's, and two to his children both of whom were studying out of town. There was also a note to the police. Bade Rai opened the letter. It read as follows :

Respected fatherly Chachaji,

Many a time after my acquittal I had the desire to present myself before you to confess my crime. My father never gave me a chance. Had I been convicted, probably my agony would have been a shade lighter. But that did not happen, and the agony has become unbearable. Through this crisis, you have performed all the duties of a father as well as those of a father's friend. That I was acquitted honourably

of this serious charge of murder, I owe entirely to you. But all along I kept wondering if I would be able to acquit myself in the court of my conscience, where I am being constantly tried. In that court, I am the judge, I am the defendant and I am the prosecutor. When my father asks me, will I be able to claim innocence by flashing the Council order before him? My wife and my children may never have spoken a word, may not have looked upon me as a criminal, but don't they know the truth? Maybe the children don't know, but my wife? She may be delighted by my honourable discharge, but would she be able to forget that her husband killed a maid given to her by her mother in dowry? A maid whom we were supposed to protect and look after? You know how much attached our women are to their mother's household. You too knew I was guilty, yet you kept up the battle for my acquittal, though I am not your son, nor your brother. In fact, I was the one to have your brother dismissed. You turned out to be the one to save me from the gallows.

I regret that in these circumstances, I cannot forgive myself. My father wanted me to achieve something in life. I did achieve it, but at one fell stroke it all crumbled like a toy made of mud. Probably, it hadn't been properly baked. Here my father didn't even give me the right to present myself before him for a pardon. But I will now present myself before him, having cleaned myself with the waters of death. Possibly, I can now ask for his forgiveness. The fire of death is known to reduce the gravest sins to ashes. There is no sinner and no man of virtue after death has dealt with them. Please pray for me, and keep a benevolent eye on the little ones.

Farewell.

Yours,
Vir Bahadur

Bade Rai sobbed to read the letter. For several days, Vir Bahadur's suicide and the letter blocked out everything else from his mind. He went personally to attend the *terahvin*. I went with

him. He had never travelled alone in his life; now it was more difficult than ever. And I was the only available companion. I was startled to see bhabhi. She had two daughters, who looked exactly like her. She herself was as fair as I had seen her then; the face too had not changed much except for a few signs of age. Some hair had turned gray. The eyes had black rings around them.

'Come, bhaiyā, sit here,' she said as she saw me. We sat silently for a brief while. Then she spoke :

'Was it for this that Chachaji put himself out so much on our account? When he had got what he wanted, he just picked up and left, without a thought for me! How can I face Bade Rai now? And that, after he had done for us what my father-in-law himself had refused to do!'

I was listening in silence. A little later, she said :

'Take me to Bade Rai. Let me touch his feet and seek his forgiveness on his behalf. I have an equal share in everything he did, good or evil.'

She got up and proceeded before me. Her daughters stared after her. She came out and fell at Bade Rai's feet. Bade Rai first hesitated, but then picked her up by the shoulders and tried to comfort her : 'You have no reason to worry as long as I am alive. You're like Bhaskar and Rani to me— both you and your daughters.'

Although the end of her sari covered her forehead in a veil, she turned her face towards me and said in a whispered tone : 'I have come only to seek your forgiveness on behalf of your nephew. You had a greater claim on him than his father. The real claim belongs to him who can lift the child spattered in sin and hold him close to his heart. And he left without so much as a by-your-leave to you! How can we show you our faces? He has left letters to me and his daughters entrusting us with the duty of seeking your forgiveness on his behalf.'

'Everyone makes mistakes. He has atoned for his mistake by giving up his life. Where's the question of his being a sinner now? He wrote to me : 'Nothing survives the fires of death, neither sin, nor virtue.' And death it is which has conspired to turn our victory into a defeat.'

We came back the same evening, one reason being that staying the night on such occasions was considered inauspicious.

All through the journey, Bade Rai grieved for Vir Bahadur as if he was his third son. During the pendency of the case in the court, he had become deeply attached to him. He could never bring himself to believe that it was indeed he who had committed the crime.

There was now another corner of his heart that'd never be filled again.

People like him found themselves strangers in the new, post-Independence environment. Whenever a regime changes, some people are rendered irrelevant by the new regime itself while some others render themselves irrelevant. But there is always a class of people which changes itself with the regime and gives, or tries to give, itself a new relevance. Living through a change of regime is not given to many, coming as it does once in centuries. Since I had lived through one, I considered myself lucky.

Those who had changed their colours with Independence and had lost themselves in the new crowd were a happy lot. Bade Rai did not have their worldly wisdom, not their resourcefulness.. He had stockaded himself behind the towering structure of his ego and refused to come out. He refused to consider himself part of the waves of change that were sweeping everything in their path. In his opinion, everything that had happened was contrary to the norms of decorum that governed the behaviour of the ruling upper classes. The big zeroes of yesterday were the heroes of today. Actually, none of us knew then that social change necessarily means a destruction of these fossilized upper-class norms.

I too didn't realize it. It is nevertheless true that this is how privilege always meets its end. Raghubar knew it, and told me so repeatedly. The age of privilege, he said, was at an end : both for those who created privilege and those who sported it. As long as we continue to delude ourselves with the idea that we belong to the privileged class, the change, he said, will continue to elude us.

Bade Rai's thoughts kept returning to Vir Bahadur's suicide.

Of late he had started interpreting it in terms of the change in regime. If not a physical suicide, he argued, the only way out for a self-respecting person today was a social suicide, or withdrawal from the society. How long can one put up with so much effrontery? How long can one keep the doors of one's self-respect shut?

People, of course, still invited him. However much the times might have changed, there was still a class of people who felt honoured by his visit. But, like a fisherman steering his boat away from the midstream, Bade Rai was slowly cutting himself away from his society. This also affected us and I sometimes asked him what he was hoping to again from this course of action. His reply, given with a smile, was always the same : 'I am now old man. Like an old coin, worn out by age and no longer acceptable currency. A coin, like this must be sent back to the mint, or everyone will keep turning it in his hands before returning it. I was now beginning to open my mouth before him, but of course not much. I enumerated to him the names of all those who were worn out by age, but who had acquired a fresh coat of polish and were back in circulation. Even in his present condition, and despite his old age, Bade Rai could not bear being compared with any one else. He therefore reacted in one of the two ways : either by keeping quiet, or by making his displeasure known. If he wanted to do the latter, he would say : 'So let them have another coat of polish, if that's what they want Not for me to stop anyone. But for myself- – I'm quite happy with the run I had. People have found independence— they have my best wishes. As for me, this independence of yours has given me nothing but slavery. Independence means more respect for the individual, but I have only seen respect for me go down. I'm bound to my old values, and I'm not going to give them up. Nor will probably they give me up.'

There was no scope for further argument.

Raghubar, of course, sometimes did not give up. He had now passed M.A., and had acquired some ideas of his own about independence, its meaning, etc. Independence, he said, was always for something. It must always have a purpose. Independence without

a purpose is a disaster worse than slavery. To me, his ideas appeared corny. 'You can't change Dadaji's thinking now,' he told me, 'He had a purpose. He was an important cog in the feudal machine, and he believed that he was running that machine. Now people are pleased as punch with this toy of freedom, but this is not the freedom that Gandhi fought for. It's the freedom of the neo-feudals— people who talk about the common man but whose sole purpose is to preserve the exclusive, elite character of their own class. This is the only way they can preserve their privileges.

Raghubar would often have the old dresses, letters, turbans, suits, parasols, bolsters, etc. belonging to Bade Rai taken out. Then he would examine them closely. Bade Rai loved this and used the occasions to din some 'sense' into Raghubar's head. 'Renewals must be anchored in tradition,' he would say, 'There can be nothing new if cut off from the old.' His word for 'new' or 'modern' was *jadīd* (modernity), 'It's tradition which gives you the vision for the future,' he said.

Raghubar, of course, couldn't keep quiet. 'What use is all this wealth of yours, Dadaji?' he would ask, 'Here today, gone tomorrow! You get new leaves only when the old ones fall. Everything that's old must fall. Only the stem remains. Call it tradition, if you like, but for me it's just the stem— the site where the new leaves will sprout.'

Bade Rai linked Raghubar's ideas with Seema. This was not surprising, as in situation like these man does tend to hold the person one dislikes responsible for everything that happens, rightly or wrongly. Bade Rai had made up his mind that, mesmerised by the Rai name and by the leftover glory and wealth of the Rais, Rame Babu was out to get his grandson for his son- in-law. The 'special' people have this special characteristic : They cannot imagine that they can be wrong either in their thoughts or in their methods. The fault always lies with the other person.

One day, Bade Rai put it directly to Raghubar. 'Raghubar,' he said, 'I have a feeling that Rame Babu & company have got you under siege. All his life he has done nothing but yes sir his

bosses. Their eyes are set on you. Our families, it is true, have relations stretching back to generations,. but by no stretch of imagination could they be said to measure up to us.'

Raghubar was now as impertinent young man. This sort of impertinence was fast becoming a hallmark of the new set of young men. Bade Rai held Independence squarely responsible for this development. To these young men, freedom meant freedom to be impertinent. Whenever he heard Bade Rai talk like this, he either paid no attention to him and staged a walkout, or would say something rude. No one had ever behaved with Bade Rai like this before : he just wouldn't put up with this kind of impudence. But now he had to. All due, first, to the changed circumstances, and, second, to his fondness for his grandson. Raghubar rejoined at once:

'Dadaji, Rame Chacha doesn't come here to invite me to his place. I go there myself. I go there because I like going there. They don't suffer from any sense of inferiority, nor from an inflated ego. Moreover, my visits to their place did not start recently. I've been going there ever since I was a child, and I don't think they think the way you do.'

That day, Bade Rai too had his say :

'You're not a child any more : you're a grown up. Whatever one does as a child is set down to innocence, but you can't repeat it as a young man and hope to get away with it. Our family line enjoys a blameless reputation. We have always trodden the path of honour. Are you going to be the one to sully that record?'

If I happened to be present on such occasions, I would nip the issue in the bud, if not, Raghubar would not let slip the opportunity. This time, he said :

'Dadaji, privilege too is in itself a stain on one's character, a stain that stands out and terrorises others. It is a symptom of this privileged mentality to consider oneself superior and others inferior. Taimur Lung is known for his tyranny and cruelty; in the same way, feudals are known for their arrogance and for their exploitation of the poor. But the times when society counted for nothing and the individual for everything are now gone. Today, the individual is a part of the society, and he cannot be allowed to slander the

society by indulging in such talk,'

That day Bade Rai knew for certain that Raghubar was going to walk all over the dream castles he had built with so much longing. A cry of pain escaped him. For the first time, he also knew that his wings were clipped. He was an old and decrepit lion caged by Time. Had he not been caged, he would not have let the impertinence of his grandson go unpunished. A face-off like this one was usually followed by a temporary mutual boycott. The boycott, however, never lasted very long, and very soon the grandson and the grandfather would be jabbering away to each other again. Bade Rai had not spoked to Arun and to Majhhale Rai for years now. though Raghav Rai did occasionally show up to check on him. These standards, however, he found it difficult to apply to Raghubar. Each one of them had his fingers on the weak spot of the other. The day-to-day needs of Raghubar could not be met without Bade Rai, as all Raghubar's requisitions turned down by me found a court of appeal in Bade Rai. Bade Rai's decision, no matter what argument I used, was always against me. He still glimpsed the future of the Rai family in the person of Raghubar.

This was Raghubar, the Rebel. Not the gun-toting variety, but the variety which is opposed to everything and is filled with disgust for everything. One could trace the origin of this attitude to several sources— some personal, some global. Among the personal sources were Saranga, Sona and me. Bade Rai too. He was seeking a new style of living, one that would be entirely his own. Motivated by reasons of her own, Sona was constantly interfering in this quest of Raghubar. Saranga too interfered. Her reason was Girwar. The issue could be anything— the grandfather's partiality for Raghubar, the frequent replenishments of his wardrobe, or his pocket expenses. The grandfather's partiality too had a cost : constant meddling. Where were you? Why didn't you have your lunch/dinner? Why not a proper change of clothes? What was the meeting with X for? Why weren't you home on time? Why this hobnobbing with Rame Babu's daughter? For Sona, Seema was a cause of envy, for Bade Rai, a challenge to his honour. As for me, I didn't come up

to his expectations at all. Even as a provider, I was losing credibility everyday. Poverty was beginning to cast its long shadow. A return from wealth to poverty is painful, and more shameful than painful, though feeling shameful about poverty is shameful too. I realized this when I had to resort to penny-pinching, thought it was still penny-pinching and not outright penury, which is the equivalent of death.

The stables were empty. The coach, the phaeton, the gig, the tonga were all crumbling into dust. Cloth covers lay on them. The clerks' counters in the *dīwānkhānā* were beginning to lean; dogs lolled in the cushions— themselves in tatters— inside them. Bade *Dīwānjī* had his seat on a cushioned *takht* : a bitch had littered underneath. Farmers, who once sat in the shade of our camp houses to escape the heat were now buying them up. Time, which had contrived our decline, had also contrived their rise. The bullocks and the horse carts which camped there had also been bought up by them. Even the land under the plough was put up for sale in bits and pieces now and then. Short of money? Sell the land. it was as simple as this. In retrospect, I feel that even robbers and bandits probably treated land with greater respect than did the zamindars. Land was no mother to us, no, not even a resource. It was a currency— plain and simple. The situation is worse today. Land has simply turned into a consumable. Attachment to land is a thing of the past. Only the livestock remained at the haveli : all other animals were gone. The one thing that Bade Rai missed above all else was the horses. One could probably have bought one, but maintaining it was the problem. We could have got the feed– straw, maize, barley, etc.— from our fields, but where would we get the money for a keeper and a coachman? Kalu Sāīs's nephew, Phattu, was of course still with us, and, since the horses died, had been working in the fields. He urged me repeatedly to buy a horse— Bade Rai is greatly inconvenienced for lack of one, he said— and he would gladly take up all the work it entailed. I said nothing. Raghubar, however, was provoked. 'A horse indeed!' he said. 'One would think the whole world rides a coach! If not, what right have

we to ride one?' Though I was a cyclist, this argument was beyond my comprehension. If we could afford one, why shouldn't we ride a coach? Bade Rai was shocked to hear the argument : How dare this boy compare us with 'the whole world'? Is he going to wipe out everything we built up? The return journey from the privileged to the common certainly leaves you gasping for air.

Like gold, land too was very cheap then, in fact, cheaper than gold, if you compare them with their current prices. Grain prices were the determining factor; the prices of everything else were set in relation to them. Today, everything determines its own price— in fact, grain prices are determined by the prices of other things. Be that as it may, we have had to sell some land to repay debts and pay some outstanding bills. Land was in plenty, in fact, only the records knew how much, so who cared how much was sold? It was anyway a very forgettable practice to mortgage land. Actually, raising loans was evidence that your had good credit and were among the well-to-do. But, for us, it was painful : selling land was like a part of your meal taken away. Though, the meal was, of course, a substantial one. But how long would it remain substantial?

When the sale money was in our hands, we first settled our debts. Some money was left over, and everyone got onto their wishing horses. Jewellery for Sona, someone said. So there was jewellery. A suit for Raghubar, someone suggested, and the cloth was suitably delivered to the tailor. *Achkans* were made for Bade Rai and me. A sari for Saranga, a kurtā-paijama and a coat for Girwar. Also a pair of shoes. The haveli was whitewashed and painted. It was a huge job and took months and thousands of rupees to complete. Probably this was the last face-lift the haveli received. The balance was spent on clothes for servants. Bade Rai wanted the coaches to be painted. To save them from white ants, he said. That led to a lot of unpleasantness. Should we give our coaches a coat of paint or our stomachs a lining of food— that was the issue. Once again, Raghubar opened his mouth and put his foot in it : 'Have these talismans of the feudal past hacked into usable pieces and use them in the stove,' he advised. 'Who do you think wants to be seen in them and become a laughing stock?' To Bade Rai,

this sounded like curses heaped on a near and dear one.

The other row centred around Raghubar's suit, though this was by no means the first of its kind. Any time Raghubar got a new and decent set of clothes, Saranga hit the ceiling. And this time there was Sona's jewellery to boot! That day Saranga broke all her past records. It was the biggest tantrum she had ever thrown. She stated flatly that this house had no place for her and her son. 'I have always been treated like a maid,' she said, 'and now my son is also going to be treated life-long as a servant at the beck and call of everyone. A kurtā-pajama for the servant and a suit for the prince! Jewels for the daughter and a *dhoti* for the kitchen maid! I refuse to be a maid. I'll go and wash and scrub for others, but I refuse to be called the *bahu* of this house and be treated like this!'

It was of course I who had to bear the brunt of it all. So long as Chhoti Chachi was living, she used persuasion, cajolery and even coercion, but always succeeded in bringing the situation under control. Now I stood in the firing-line unprotected. The day I spent at work, but, at night, when I entered the haveli, Saranga hurled Girwar's clothes and her sari at me. I was thankful that she didn't also throw Girwar's shoes. 'Keep this *baksheesh*. Give it to whoever you fancy. I will not stay in this house as a maid.' It was the first time that the rebellion had surfaced so openly. 'My son may be a dumb-wit, but he will not wait on anyone. Jewellery for your daughter and this. . . this dhoti for me!'

I tried to explain to her that Sona was approaching the time when she should be getting married, and how difficult it would be to buy the jewellery all at once, and shouldn't we therefore start the process of slow accumulation? Moreover, she did not have a lot of jewellery. Had the Rai treasure been there, there would have been no need to buy. But she was unmoved. I spent the whole night trying to make her see reason, but she didn't give an inch. It was the curse of marrying a young wife.

Next day, word reached Raghubar. He checked with Bhavani, who briefed him on the details : *Bahuji* without dinner last night. Girwar's playtime cancelled, and so on. When he asked Sona, she

filled in the gaps. 'I don't want any jewellery. I'll be damned if I touch it! My mother is dead doesn't mean anyone can say what she likes about me and get away with it!' Raghubar brought down her temper and went directly to the tailor. 'Get a suit for Girwar out of that cloth,' he told him. 'I don't want the suit.' The tailor was an old Rai faithful, and wouldn't take the amendment to the order : 'What are you saying, Bhaiya? Bade Rai himself got this cloth for you, with such fondness.'

'No, master sahib, he's my younger brother and he needs a suit. When I need one, I'll get another one made. I also don't fancy this colour.

'But. . . it's Bade Rai's order!'

'Actually, I have decided not to have a suit at all. It was different in the past. Now the country is free. Strutting about in a suit seems to me like heaping insults on the unclothed millions of this country.'

'This is against the Rais' prestige,' said the tailor, 'The Rais have been wearing the finest of clothes for centuries. Even the British envied them their dresses.'

'The British were our guests. We had to dress up before them. Now we are amongst our own people, so where is the need to dress up? Don't we dress casually at home? If we have a visitor, we put on proper clothes, don't we? But even that must stop now. Clothes accentuate differences.'

This was all *Greek* to the tailor. Raghubar made his amendment final and returned.

Two days later, Mohd. Omar brought the ready suit to the haveli. When the suit fitted Girwar rather than Raghubar, Bade Rai lost his temper. Omar very meekly offered that Raghubar Babu had made an amendment to the order and this was the result of the amendment. Fortunately, Raghubar was at home at that moment. He was called and he admitted having made the amendment. Had he not been at home, Mohd. Omar would have had it that day.

'Why?' asked Bade Rai.

'I don't like suits. I am giving up suits.'

'Why?'

'British dress. Gone with the British.'

'What's all this nonsense?' Bade Rai was irritated. 'There is so much the British have left behind. Aren't you going to use any of it? Won't you use the trains? The buses? There're so many people around wearing suits. Aren't they Indian?'

'I can only speak for myself. I don't wish to wear clothes which make the other person feel inferior. As for the trains, everyone can use them. Not everyone can wear suits.

It was as if a bolt had hit Bade Rai. He tried to look closely at Raghubar, but he was already out of sight.

Raghubar was now the centre of all action. Everyone of us— Bade Rai, me, Sona, Girwar— had our eyes fixed on Raghubar. We were always watching what he did, what he ate, what he wore, listened to what he said, and were curious about where he went. He and Seema had now started exchanging letters, and Sona knew it. She was always on a lookout for a chance to get her hands on the letters so that she could teach him to ignore his sister. Raghubar too probably had a shrewd idea of what was in her mind; he therefore kept the letters under lock and key. One day he was gone for his bath, leaving the keys on his bed. Sona entered the room for some purpose and saw the keys. Quickly, she unlocked the almirah, ransacked it, and found the letters neatly arranged in a lacquered walnut box. She picked up the letters, discarded the box and off she went. The lock was back in place, looking undisturbed.

He returned from the bath and groomed himself. Then he re-read the day's letter. When he opened the box to add the letter to the pile, he found the pile gone! he called out to Bhavani. Entered Bhavani. Seeing the murderous look on his face, Bhavani felt a little daunted. But he knew nothing. When he was asked, he said so. But he knew that Sona had entered the room a short while before.

Bhavani made his way to Sona's room at once. Sona had locked herself in her room and was busy reading the letters. When Bhavani knocked, she quickly hid the letters under the mattress and inquired: 'Who is it?'

'It's me, Deva. Open the door. Quick! Bhaiya is mad.' 'Deva' was his pet name for Sona, perhaps coined by him on the analogy of 'Devi.'

She opened the door at once and asked : 'What's the matter?'

'Give me the letters at once. There's no telling what Raghubar Bhaiya might do.'

'I don't have them.'

'You were in his room a little while ago.'

'So what?'

'Look, Deva. Try to understand. Give me the letters or you'll have hell to pay.'

'I won't The cheek of the shameless bitch! Writing letters to my brother! I'm his elder sister, and he treats me as dirt. I'm going to show the letters to everyone.'

'Don't! If you push him too hard, he might end up doing God knows what. The Rai family will be ruined! Give them to me. I'll take it all on myself.'

By this time, Raghubar had reached the spot. His face spoke murder. Sona too was scared, but she stood her ground. Raghubar asked Bhavani : 'What happened?'

He kept quiet. Raghubar suddenly turned to Sona. She was a bit nervous. He looked her in the eyes and demanded : 'Give them to me!'

'What?'

'The letters.'

'What letters?'

'The ones you stole from my almirah. You broke the lock.'

She suddenly blurted out : 'It was unlocked. . .' though this too was false.

He shouted loudly : 'Never mind it was locked or not. I want the letters.'

'I have no letters from you.'

Raghubar pushed his way into the room and tore everything apart. The letters were intact under the mattress. He took them out.

'You are my elder sister! You steal the personal letters of

your younger brother.' He was trembling with rage.

'Yes, I did! What have you got with Seema? Why does she write to you? You don't have a moment for us and all the time in the world for her! You meet her and you write letters to her! What relation is she to you?'

'That's none of your business. You're jealous because no one writes letters to you.'

'I'm not like her— a cheap flirt!' said Sona, but the insult had hit her where it hurt most. Tears spilled to her eyes.

He roared. 'Don't you call her names! If she's is a flirt, there's not a girl in the world who isn't!'

Bhavani intervened : 'Chhote Bhaiya, think of what you're saying! She's is your elder sister!'

He put him down too. 'Bhavani Kaka. You knew, but you didn't speak. It doesn't lie in your mouth to give me advice.'

Bhavani's face flushed for a moment, then an agony struck him. He fought the agony and said

'Don't say that. I came here only to find out.'

Raghubar's roar was louder now : 'You're in league with her!'

Bhavani paused, then spoke hesitantly.

'I'm sorry. It was my mistake. Do forgive me. It won't happen again. I gave the letters to Deva.'

Sona's gaze froze on Bhavani's face. Raghubar shot out like an arrow.

Bhavani spoke to Sona in a whisper : 'Never bring it to your lips. . . I know Raghubar Bhaiya won't forgive me. . . ever.'

And that was exactly what happened. Raghubar withdrew totally. He now lived with us like a stranger forced to live among foreigners. The only saving grace in the situation was that Sona accepted Bhavani's advice and did not reveal the secret on anyone. Raghubar anyway never spoke a word to Sona, now Bhavani too had been shut out. This of course caused a great difficulty for Raghubar. Bhavani suffered a lot of anguish on this account, but instead of annoyance he was filled with an extra degree of concern for Raghubar. Like Bade Rai, Raghubar too had now become his

personal charge, thought he was careful not to let it become apparent to him that all his personal necessities now looked after by him. The only person Raghubar spoke to was Girwar, who was now growing up and was so deeply attached to his elder brother that he would pick up a fight with even his mother on his account.

Bade Rai was losing his mobility, so he would call Raghubar and make him sit with him. Raghubar obliged. Often Bade Rai wanted him to read chapters from the *Gita*. His enunciation of Sanskrit texts was excellent; he also gave excellent commentaries. Sometimes Bade Rai asked him :

'Raghubar, do you have any problem? Is anything bothering you?'

He would only shake his head.

'Why are you so close-lipped then?'

'No,. . . I'm not.' And he would fall silent again.

Like a silent and slow-working poison, an impotent rage possessed Bade Rai. In Raghubar's presence, however, that rage turned into agony. He would plead with him, his voice breaking with pain : 'Raghubar, I'm counting my last days. Why do you want to heap misery on me? I want to talk to you. I want you to talk to me. I lie in bed and I think of you, but you are all the while thinking up new ways of tormenting me. I know you don't like me, but just remind yourself that I'm not your future; I'm your past. You may like your past, or you may not, but you can't run away from it. I used to think you'll be the salve on my wounds, wounds that I 've had to receive all over me in the battles of life; but now I know I must carry these wounds with me to the pyre– like an abandoned soldier.'

Raghubar had nothing, not a word of assurance or consolation, to say in reply. Only a feeling that he had left his grandfather far, far behind. He could hear his voice carried over the distance. When in a better mood, Bade Rai told Raghubar the story of the last journey of the Pāndavas : Draupadi was the first to fall by the wayside, then Nakul, then Sahdev, followed by Arjun and Bhīm. Each one of them asked why the last one had fallen, and Yudhistir gave the reasons. The dog was bringing up the rear. The society

looked upon the dog with contempt— he was a commoner shooed away by everyone, yet it was his tryst with life that had lasted the longest, a testimony to his faith in life and love for it. But what about him— Raghubar? He too was a commoner. In every age, the chosen ones fall like the Pāndavas, and are buried under the icy rocks of time. A new class of chosen ones takes their place. He knew that he could do nothing to help anyone. He was like that fuel-gatherer at whose luckless touch the fuel-giving trees recoil and go into a shell. . .

More and more, Seema was beginning to resemble a sculpture stuck in a muddy patch, which people wanted to pull out and cast away, but which, with every effort of theirs, slid deeper into the soft ground. Raghubar's mind was disturbed at the efforts made by Sona and Bhavani. He could not put away from his mind the fact that his letters had been stolen by those whom he had trusted most. Now he did not trust anyone— at least Bhavani had forfeited his trust completely. The nature of his relationship with Seema, however, underwent a change with every change in the shape of things around him. The ambiguity and amorphousness inherent in such relationships was gradually giving way to a clearer definition. Seema was helping him to unravel the complex psychic knots into which he had tied himself with his paranoid assumption of a universal antipathy to his ideas and beliefs. Though there was still place in his heart for Bade Rai and me, he found himself unable to achieve the kind of rapport with us that he wished for. Our notions of superiority and dynastic elitism, he felt, left no room for any of the things that he believed in— be it in the matter of personal relationships or a life-giving philosophy.

Then Sona got married, and Raghubar felt deserted. The gulf that separated them filled up suddenly. Sona's wedding was hardly comparable with Rani's, but everything that the Rai name called for was arranged. The family she was married into wasn't a very distinguished one, and they didn't seem to be terribly disappointed with our efforts either. Raghubar drove himself to the limits, and

beyond, in trying to make the wedding a success. He was everywhere. Everything had to have his personal attention. Before Sona said her farewells, she sent for Raghubar. Raghubar came and was overwhelmed to see Sona. Tears streamed from her eyes. 'Raghubar,' she said, 'I know you're unhappy with me. I'm unhappy with you too. Never once did you let me into your life. We were born of the same mother, and were the only ones so born in the family, yet we lived like strangers. Why? Maybe each of us waited for the other to cross the *Lakshman Rekhā* of our egos— but neither did. It's now time for me to say farewell. Can I ask you just one question? You couldn't love your own sister,how did you manage to love Seema? I always strove to make you happy, and always ended up making you unhappy. I stole your letters hoping you'll come to me, beg me, share your secret with me, but the plan boomeranged. I took the letters, but Bhavani Bhaiya took the blame. He wanted to save me from your wrath. He is suffering, he is suffering because you are angry with him. . . please, please do not prolong his suffering!' She burst our crying.

Raghubar now felt that he was answerable to everyone. He had all along prided himself on his superior knowledge, and in his pride had failed to see the injustice he had done to everyone around him. Is it possible that Chhoti Ma too is waiting for him to approach her and call her mother? But how could he? He never had a clear picture of a mother. For him a mother had always been an emotional construct— like God.

After Sona had left, he looked for Sona for many days— within himself. When eventually he had to go to Sona's place to fetch her, he discovered that he had lost all claims on her. She was a plain relative, nothing more than an inscribed word!

When preparations for Sona's wedding were on Chhote Rai came everyday. Arun, like an invited guest, put in only one appearance. Everyone in the town expected that Chhote Rai and Arun would help us in all possible ways. I too had a lurking expectation. However, we had made all necessary arrangements for financing the marriage. We had an orchard. It had been with the Rai family

for a very long time. Bade Rai had spent nights getting the orchard planted with fruit trees from far and near. He had only to hear of a rare or a good quality fruit to immediately arrange for a graft to be made, or seedlings to be planted, in the orchard. The orchard was like a member of our family. When we had horse coaches, we would pay a visit to the orchard once a month or once in two months, and feasted ourselves on fresh fruit. Tukhmi. Dusshera, Malda, Langda, Fazli, Gulab Pasand. Badshah Pasand, Totapari, Safeda— the orchard boasted of an endless variety of mangoes. The Safeda guava of the orchard was a famed fruit. Oranges, tangerines, pears, malta, falsa, laucat, peaches, plums, alubukhara,— you name it, the orchard had it. When the fruit feast was over and it happened to be winter, we would conduct ourselves to the sugarcane press for a dessert of fresh *gur*. Friends and relatives who happened to be with us were given presents of gur, *andarki*, etc. A pīr's grave also graced the orchard. The estate had arranged a lamp to be burnt at the grave all the twenty-four hours. On special occasions a *chādar* offering was also made. This was the place where parents of sick children came to seek recovery and good health for them and pledged offerings. When the prayers were fulifilled, *shirni* was offered. A specially appointed caretaker tended the grave.

During the zamindari days I was once waylaid outside the orchard by some bandits. I was carrying some revenue receipts in cash. Normally this was *Dīwānjī's* work, but for some reason I happened to be doing it that day. I was without an escort. The coach stood on the main road. For a moment, I panicked. I was reminded of Majhhale Rai's fate. I could not have taken on all of them single-handed, particularly since all the four of them were armed. I closed my eyes like the pigeons, who, when confronted by a cat, close their eyes and pretend that it is gone. But suddenly I had a sort of hallucination. I felt as if a glowing light emanated from the *pīr's* grave and covered the whole sky. I do not recollect what happened next, but when I opened my eyes, evening had descended, the birds were chirping away on the way to their nests, and the bandits were nowhere to be seen. Everyone told me that

it was the *pīr* who had brought about the miracle, though, to this day, it is not clear to me how.

That was the orchard that we sold to meet the expenses of Sona's wedding. The *pīr* went with the orchard. We went to the grave to seek his pardon before signing the sale deed. We offered him a *chādar* and we said : 'We seek your forgiveness. We're sorry we couldn't serve you the way we should have. We must marry our daughter and we don't know how else.' That night Bade Rai saw a bearded old man in white flowing robes in his dreams. He came, stood next to Bade Rai's bed and fixed him with his gaze. Then Bade Rai saw him walk away into the distance till he disappeared from view. Bade Rai woke up. There was absolute silence everywhere; everyone was fast asleep. Bade Rai sat thinking for a long time : Who could it have been? Was it the *pīr* himself? Then he thought of the orchard. It was going for a song— not even the cost of the trees was being recovered. The next day, when the deed was signed, he felt as if the same old man was standing behind him and looking at him with a pained expression on his face. Bade Rai turned around, but there was no one there. That day, Bade Rai cried at home for the second time in his life. As he raised his hand to sign the deed, it wavered and shrank as if from a murder. We had sold much land, but never before had any land sale left us feeling so empty as did the sale of the orchard.

Sona's marriage was short-lived. One day, two years later, Sona's husband brought her home and left her with us. This was a calamity not only for Bade Rai but for the whole family. They came together— Sona, her husband and her father-in-law. Sona went inside. The husband and the father-in-law said they had some business in town and would be back soon. And they disappeared. After they had gone, Sona burst out crying. No one knew why she was crying. When, a little while later, she composed herself she told us that they had left her for good. Immediately, men were despatched to the railway station and the bus station, but they could not be found anywhere. Later we discovered that they had moved to a business friend's house and slipped away the next morning

in someone's car. This incident buried the remaining prestige of the Rais under another few cartsful of sodden earth. There was no way of recovering from this disaster. We went to them, we begged them, but they didn't budge an inch. They accused us of deceipt. Perhaps they had thought that a bride from such a wealthy family would fill their house with gems and line the walls with gold. They were traders and not used to open dealings. When we prodded them further, all they came out with was that they suspected her to be barren. Two years had passed without a child being born, they said, nor did there seem to be any hope. We told them that we could have both of them medically examined but they were positive that they didn't want any medical examination, nor did they want to keep our daughter with them. We could get her remarried, if we were so inclined. Suddenly, what had transpired with Majhhali Chachi flashed in my mind. What a nasty habit do days past have of repeating themselves when least expected!

Bade Rai was now fully bed-ridden. I was totally alone. There was Raghubar, but what could he do? He watched Sona and despaired. She would also occasionally come out with statements like : 'Raghubar, I gave you much pain. This is God's punishment.' Raghubar didn't know what to do, so he only clapped his hand on her mouth and said : 'Don't bring such words to your lips, *didi!*' Saranga was tight-lipped and wondering how to react to the whole thing. Girwar had now attached himself to Sona. For the first few days, Sona was quite at sea, then she decided on her destiny. She took over the entire housework. We tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. When Bade Rai heard of it, he made no effort to stop her, but only said : 'What else can she do? With me, Time at least waited this long before tightening its grip; her, it gripped barely out of childhood. Didn't give her even the chance to look around and see what was what.'

When she could have, she had paid no attention to studies. Now, when the time had passed, she started on her student career with the help of Raghubar. Housework and studies— the two went together. But you need to develop a study habit for studies and

she had lost it long ago. She felt as if she was trying to run on a moss-grown surface. Saranga too had begun to realize that it would be difficult to get along with Sona for long. Once or twice she produced a few curses for Sona's in-laws. Sona said nothing. Then, one day, she included Sona's husband. . . : 'What a rotten man! Leaving his wife here on his parents' bidding. Even Ram wasn't guilty of that! Shame on the spineless fellow!'

Sona was probably as much devoted to her husband as any devoted woman is. She said at once : 'Don't blame him. Chhoti Ma. I know he's innocent.'

Saranga's tongue was everyone's enemy, including her own. It proved itself again. 'He kicked you out of his house, and yet you worship him! And here we are— carrying you like a millstone round our necks, and barely able to breathe, and we haven't the right to utter a beep against him!.'

It hurt Sona to the quick. She insisted on going to her nānā's house and left a few days later. There she studied, and there she took up a job. She went through a period of hesitation and indecision before taking up the job, unable to muster enough courage : how could a granddaughter of Bade Rai's work for wages? But she finally decided that she had to live by her hands, come what may. Only work with your own hands could give you the security that no one could take away.

Almost everything that now happened added to the weight that was already crushing Bade Rai.

Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night. I would then feel as if someone was pushing a rock onto my chest. When you are faced with problems which are insoluble, or seemingly so, you either turn then into games of some sort, or you hold then in fear like death itself. I was stuck so deep in the *quagmire* of problems that there was no question of my treating them as games. I was going through an experience similar to that of the sinking of a gigantic liner, thanks to the spectacle provided by the Rai family. I would probably never have grasped what the sinking of a ship is like but for a painting which I had seen in the house of

a friend of Bade Rai's : John. It showed an enormous ship going down. Men and women, young and old, were shown jumping and falling into the sea like rats, hundreds of them. Seeing that painting, Death a few yards away appeared to be almost a saviour as compared to Death Here and Now, and we wanted to grab for it. Only time told us that Death Now and Death a short time away are death nevertheless. We couldn't have jumped either. Bade Rai lay in bad, staring at the ceiling all the time. His diet was shrinking day by day. Even water prickled in his throat. He complained of constant hot flushes. Probably he was now beginning to realize that the responsibility for all that had happened lay on him and not on the man at the deck-wheel— that's me.

One day, I sent for Raghubar and spoke to him frankly. 'Look,' I said, 'I cannot shoulder this burden any longer. If this house has to be saved, you simply have to pitch in. So long you have been Bade Rai's grandson; now you are the son of a common man called Bhaskar Rai. I'll not be able to carry on like this for long. You'll have to accept the fact that you're the son of a farmer, not the heir apparent of a noble zamindar. I have in fact been a farmer all along— only I didn't realize it. But I have discovered it now, and what you discover last is what lasts. To help with the plough, and to brave the scorching sun in the fields— that's the legacy I have got. I have to do my duty by you, by your mother as well as by your brother and sister. . . and by my own father. . .'

I hadn't realized that Raghubar could be so insolent. He said :

'Babuji, you're most welcome to your duties towards your ancestors as well as to your posterity— but, please, for God's sake, leave me alone. I want nothing from Bade Rai, for whom you are filled with so much concern, nor from you. It'd be better, I think, if you simply forgot about me.'

I was aghast. I was looking to him for rescue— that's why I had sent for him and put it before him. But everything had come unstuck. I didn't know how to make my meaning clear to him, what to say to him that would make him see what I wanted him to see. I therefore, continued :

'I'm sorry but I don't think I quite understand what you mean.'

'I mean I understand that I'm dependent on you for my food and my clothes and the other things which you've been providing me regularly. I also know that I can never please either of you with the work I do. But it's not true that I'm unmindful of my responsibilities. My problem is that I'm being constantly chased by this smell— this smell that has its source within me, and that I've acquired in legacy. I read somewhere that in Africa there are some cannibal trees that smell like this. They trap human beings in their large fan-like leaves and then slowly suck out their blood. I therefore have no regrets at all that a property so large as ours has run to waste. Even if it had been intact, it'd have been of no use to me, since I'm not ready to become a cannibal tree.'

All I could say was : 'Wouldn't you have accepted the legacy had it been intact?'

'Never!' he almost shouted. Then, lowering his voice, continued : 'How can one have a right to anything that one has not worked for and earned himself?'

'Aren't you saying this because none of it is left now?'

'No, that's not true. Some of it still remains.'

I suspected that there was someone who was putting Raghubar up to this sort of impertinence. Irresistably, my mind turned to Rame Babu and his daughter, though I also remembered that Bade Rai used to hold Kishen Babu responsible for my own impertinences. The only difference was that I didn't have the guts to utter a single word in the presence of my father. Why only me, nobody then had the guts to open his mouth in front of his father, no matter how terrible his excess. I often had the desire to tell Bade Rai not to drag Kishen Babu in the matter, but the desire never translated into action. I decided that a father, being a father, had all the rights, so I could never look Bade Rai in the eye. Raghubar had no such scruples; he had only to have a thought for it to reach his lips. I was left wondering how filial relations could have undergone so much change.

Bade Rai was dead.

At least for me his death had left a dark void through which

I didn't know the way out. All the years he was bed-ridden, I had the feeling of being led by him through a pervading darkness. Raghubar, of course, did not face any such problems. For him, this death only meant the inevitable end of a period, nothing more. In fact, it would not surprise me if he felt that the removal of Bade Rai had let a long-obstructed ray of light into his world.

The death of a Rai was always followed by some ridiculous ceremonies. I call them ridiculous now, but at that time I must have thought of them as quite befitting. A gold and silver covered chair was taken out of the basement room. The new 'Rai' was installed or 'enthroned' thereon, (Later, that too was sold). The smaller landlords came and made offerings. All the younger brothers of the departed Rai had to be present, and had to bow before the authority of the new Rai. Any recalcitrant Rai was deprived of his share of the treasury, though he still retained his share in the property. The main treasure was of course left untouched and remained in the custody of the Chief Rai. None of this was however operative any more. I knew very well that though Chhote Rai might attend, none of the others— Arun, Majhhale Rai or his son— would. Attendance of the distant Rais was of course out of the question. Arun was, in any case, furious with Bade Rai. When Bade Rai lay in the death-bed, Arun had approached him once, but Bade Rai had raised both his hands and joined them together in a spare-me gesture. Arun had turned on his heels and walked away.

The installation ceremony was a terrible waste. The offerings too had now to be arranged by us. The traditional gift of clothes to members of the Rai family was a must, though we had been sagely advised to make do with a turban each. Raghubar was opposed to the whole thing. 'Coronation! What rubbish!' he exclaimed. 'Installation? Enthronement? What are you talking about? Why do you wish to go around with this decayed piece of rope round your neck, trying to thrust it round the necks of others too?'

Though at heart I agreed with him, yet the Rai tradition in me felt deeply offended by this irreverence. 'This is the Rai tradition,' I said.

'This tradition stinks,' he countered. 'What do you hope to get from this phony exercise performed at the cost of years of starvation? You said yourself that the plough was what you got in legacy. Then why are you playing the King now?'

I was finding Raghubar's arguments hard to counter. There was a time when a Rai talking like that would have had his limbs lopped and his cattle confiscated. Of course, the very thought was laughable now. I was repeatedly reminding myself that I was no king. I was a very ordinary mortal struggling to survive in very ordinary circumstances. Was it proper for me to stage this drama in the name of tradition? Was I not really playing the clown? Had it not been for the unbending oppostition of Raghubar, I would have gioried in the observance of the ritualities, though it would have driven me deeper into the abyss of debt. There was hardly anything left to allow me to repay the debts now. The little bit of land that remained was now our bread and butter. I had recently begun to realize that it was this poverty which had enabled me to understand these issues and to reflect on them. Our lives so far had been unregulated jaunts through ill-defined territories. Now all of us had begun to gravitate towards some well-defined meeting points.

When Sona became a wage earner, the Rai house passed through a storm. A daughter of the Rai family working for money! People thought it their obligation to make a derisory comment even if in their hearts they didn't believe in it. But in the minds of Sona and Raghubar, there wasn't even a hint of a doubt. Sona hadn't forgotten the case-histories of her grandfather's sisters and daughter. One of them had been a child-widow. She spent all her life travelling from one pilgrim station to another with a servant in tow. She sought compensation for the sin of being a widow in daily visits to saints and holy men and had thus earned a wealth of merit which had ensured her final salvation. For even the obligatory tonsure, she avoided contact with a male barber and instead depended either on a pair of scissors, which she wielded herself, or on some female of the barber species. Self- tonsure often resulted

in uneven patches. Most of her time was spent in telling beads or carrying tales. Any remaining time was spent on back-biting. When she munched food, she went through an unsymmetrical optical process with one eye growing larger, the other smaller. If ever her lie was caught, she underwent a faster colour change than a chameleon : 'I *dinna* say no such thing; this wer what I wer sayin.' Since she was Bade Rai's sister, Bade Rai took care of all her comforts in every way, even tending her personally. She had her husband's inheritance, but Bade Rai still kept adding to her kitty. She died of stomach cancer and went through hell before the end. No saint or holy man, not one of the life-full of virtuous deeeds she had spent all her time performing, came to her help. Cancer was not a disease in great currency then— perhaps people didn't recognise it. She had lost control of her biological functions completely and soiled herself every few minutes. A maid specially hired for the purpose, or the women of the house, had to clean her. Later a hole was cut in the bed itself.

The other *buā* died a lunatic. She was the daughter of Bade Rai's uncle. It was the same uncle whom, Majhhale Rai was so fond of telling us, their father had declared insane before grabbing his property. Majhhale Rai used to cite the instance when talking of Bade Rai. This sister of Bade Rai had married a very rich man. He had only one hand. Advanced in age at the time of marriage, he left the world quite early. The *buā* was a very pretty woman and had limitless wealth. After her husband's death, she fell in love with a *munshi*, who siphoned off all the wealth. In her last days, she used to wander around naked in the *zenana* courtyard shouting : 'I'm burning ... I'm burning ...someone douse this fire!' Who could have obliged her?

Whenever the question was raised why Sona had to take up a job, the answer was provided by Raghubar : 'Because Sona doesn't fancy the fate that has befallen the daughters of this house regularly. Let her stand on her own two feet.' But people still had reservations. Even Chhote Rai, a one-time champion of the feminine cause and an admirer of Gandhi, was full of grumble over this matter. Finally, Sona had to defend herself with her own words : 'Chhote Dada,'

she said, 'I'm not only a daughter of the near extinct Rai family; I'm an independent person too. How long will you go on taking the decisions about my future? You took a decision once, and you were proved wrong. Now let me take my own decisions. I'm not prepared to kill my own individuality for the sake of either my father or my husband.'

When Sona left to take up a job in another city, I felt like the king who watched death take his child but did nothing beyond talking and cursing. It was much later that I saw the correctness of Sona's decision. What despite being the father I could not divine, Sona and Raghubar decided on without the slightest hesitation. Had she not become self-supporting then, at this ripe age of eighty-four I would have been carrying on my shoulders a crushing burden – a burden from which I could not have expected deliverance in my lifetime. Like an insect caught in mud, I would have been floundering in remorse, reproaching myself for having wrecked my daughter's life.

This happened only a few years ago. Sona had retired, or was about to retire, from her employment. There was a knock on her door. She had bought herself a little house. Girwar too was grown up and had kids. One of his daughters was living with Sona, but that day she got up herself to answer the door. At first, she couldn't recognise the visitor. A withered old man stood before her. She asked him who he wanted to see.

'Don't you know me?' he asked.

She heard the voice and was transported. 'You?' she stuttered.

She covered her head with her sari and touched his feet. Flustered, she didn't know what to do, how to receive him. It was her husband, returning to her after a gap of forty years, sick and disgusted with his relatives.

'I have no right to be here,' he said, 'There was a time when I was in my prime and you were riding an unsteady boat. I turned away from you then. Today, it's my boat that's capsizing and I stand before you – only with a single purpose : to ask you to forgive me my sins.'

Sona drowned him in her love; she comforted him with her

touch, and, like a glass of clean and cold water, satisfied his thirst. She opened up the doors of her large heart and welcomed him into it. When I now look back on my past life, I cannot help feeling that the life that I had led, well-provided though it was with all the accessories of comfort and pleasure, was a narrow, self- centered one. The life that I was now watching unfold before me seemed to be as full of substance and meaning as the one I had led was empty of it. As I approach my last days, I am tormented by thoughts of Girwar and his children. What is going to be their fate? We are now down to our last piece of land and the last house. The last Rai– that's me, of the line of Rais—as helpless and dependent as any old man alive! How I wish I had understood this when I was still young!

This is a story without end. Infinite is God, infinite His creation. But I must tie up the loose ends.

I lost the trail of Raghubai somewhere. I know that Raghubar has a large heart. It can accomodate all of us be he a friend or a stranger. It accomodated us as well as Seema. But we objected to her presence there. As emotions mature and gain in subtlety, the body begins to make an exit. This I learnt from these two. Raghubar had turned into a wandering seeker of truth. Both the families apprehensions about the relationship between the two, but he was totally unconcerned with our fears. He had no home. He slept wherever he happened to be. He accepted as alms whatever he was given. He had no thought for what he wore.

Bhavani was now the only companion with whom I could share my worries about Raghubar.

Bhavani perhaps knew Raghubar better than I did. Whenever I showed anxiety about Raghubar, he would tell me : 'You can be assured that whatever Raghubar Bhaiya does, wherever he goes, he'll not do it on the sly. You can trust him. But trust and parenthood scarcely go together It is in mistrust that the parents see their parental responsibility lie.

If sometimes he was late returning home at night, I had go over to Rame Babu's place to check if he was there.

That day he was very late. Saranga had been nagging me that I

had sold out my son. Perhaps she meant 'lost'. When I reached Rame Babu's place, it was Seema who opened the door. It was quite late at night. She was startled to see me. 'You? At this hour?' she spluttered.

'Yes. Is Raghubar here?'

'Do come in.'

'No. I must be on my way. It's very late. Raghubar isn't home yet.'

Rame Babu had joined his daughter and he took up at once:

'Bhai Sahib, Raghubar is your son. Why don't you try to understand him? His head is swarming with questions. He wanders about from place to place, a walking questionnaire, trying to find answers to them. Our generation never felt the necessity of asking questions, never learnt to listen to them, or to answer them. One must learn to ask questions before one can learn to answer them. When you look at a rose and admire it, you use the criteria appropriate to a rose, not the ones applicable to a jasmine or a marigold. A rose must be judged by its own norms, not those of the other flowers. By the norms of the other flowers, it may turn out that it's not a flower at all! But when it comes to our children, we don't even have any norms.

I only asked : 'Where is he?'

'He's here, sleeping. He's decided he'd leave home and search for the answers he wants. It was with great difficulty that we have been able to stop him.'

'What can those questions be which force him to leave home in search of their answers?'

'When civilizations transit, young men standing at the transition are not aware of the age that's passing by, or of the age that's about to take its place; they are only aware of their doubts and their questions. Raghubar says questions are his life. He says he wants the questions to keep coming and going. They mustn't stay. If they do, they too will start fouling the air as did the stagnant water of the age that has gone by.'

'But I have said nothing to displease him...'

In the meantime, Seema had gone and got Raghubar over.

'Let's go home,' I said to him, 'It's quite late.'

He said : 'I must get rid of this foul smell that chases me everywhere. This grip of feudalism, holding us loosely so far, has begun to tighten. I want to break free of it, but far from releasing me, it has now entered my soul. I find it harder than ever to break free of it now.'

Suddenly I found myself saying : 'Isn't it a reality of life that we've been cast ashore by a wave of history - a wave that came, stayed, and is now gone?'

'I have had nothing to do with that wave; I don't even know it for a wave. The shores where you are lying are your shores; the debris deposited by that wave can be no part of my experience. I am midstream - with all the others like me.'

Seema raised an objection. 'You shouldn't be speaking like that to *Tāuji*,' she said.

'I know, but how can I accept responsibility for someone who never became part of my emotional being, who always remained a stranger to me? *Babuji* had to accept the entire legacy of Bade Rai's experiences, his fret and his fever. He carried this burden like a mental cripple all his life - how can I make that passivity a part of my life? Why does a father always want his children to make his joys and his sorrows their own, and to bequeath their own questions unanswered to their children? I want to become part of the whole society - of the society at large. I want to merge my own sorrows and joys with its, to give it my troubles and to share in its - but it does not respond to my bidding, because I am untrustworthy, because I am a bastard. My father once invited me to share his responsibilities. I asked myself then : Do I have his patience? Do I have the same capacity to put up with injustice? Do I have the same devotion to my father that he had to his? This legacy, which has been making its way from one individual to another, which, in our slothful and parasitic ways, we've been lugging from generation to generation, suffocates me. I feel I'm drowning by degrees in the foul and stagnant waters of this pond, and I want to move out to the free waters of that large lake which is nobody's legacy. I want to be responsible for what I do, and I

want to have a role in the making of that social order of which I am a part.'

I felt like an illiterate. I had grown like grass in the shade of a banyan tree, and could offer no answers to his questions. But I could sense that he was rejecting the entire legacy which I, my father, my father's father and so on had felt proud to be a part of. He was a child of the same legacy, and he wanted to bring it down, to hack it to pieces, and he wanted to build his prosperity on the bebris of that tradition. How was it possible? Could it be that all I did, all that I went through in the service of my father, was, in one word, wrong? I too had sought answers to my questions in my own way. Maybe I was not as intelligent. Raghubar wants to rethink those questions - in his own way. It's quite possible that had I come of age at this time rather than at the time I did, I would be confronting the same questions which confronted Raghubar today.

But all I could think of was to ask him : 'Aren't you coming home now?'

I was facing despair. All my life my father had leaned on me, but all along I had nursed the illusion that it was I and my family who had been leaning on him. Now when I was expecting my son to give me my independence, I found him chasing his own. As usual, I was seeking my liberation in his bondage.

'What objection can I have to coming home, to the place where I was born and brought up? But that house is your house. Before I enclose myself within the four walls of a house, I want a free sky to roam around in. All the sky I have so far seen is the piece that has lain like a lid atop the towering walls of the haveli for centuries. All that I know about myelf is what my grandfather, or you, or Sona, or Bhavani, or *New Mother* told me, or whatever little I picked up on my own. If there is anything more to me than that, then I know nothing about it. Is there?

Rame Babu sat speechless. Seema was looking at him mesmerised.

It was Seema who spoke : 'Aren't you getting carried away by your over-enthusiasm?'

Rame Babu nodded. 'Precisely what I was thinking,' he said.

I kept quiet. I had never faced questions like these. Nor probably had Bade Rai. If Chhote Rai or Majhhale Rai did, I wouldn't know. Sometimes you can also learn to think by thinking only about yourself.

'Difficult to say if I am,' said Raghubar. 'But the question is one of enthusiasm. The word seems to exist only in the dictionary. I want to experience it.'

'Sometimes a man loses his way. Then he can neither get there, nor can he get back,' said Rame Babu, probably trying to be helpful to me.

'But how long shall I walk the prescribed route? Even so, if I ever feel that I've wandered so far off the track that I can hardly find a way at all, I shall not hesitate to return. One, of course, returns after one has won a victory, but the return from a defeat is a return too, even if one doesn't deserve the welcome arches. It would be wrong, however, to say that the return is an inglorious one.'

Seema nodded vigorously in agreement. That day, for the first time, I felt that Seema was a shade different from the usual run of girls.

Raghubar did come back with me that night. I told Saranga not to say anything to him. She didn't like the injunction and, turning over, went off to sleep. Had I not been so attached to Raghubar, and not so serious in my attempts to understand him, I would probably not have understood him as much as I now thought I did.

Raghubar now occupied the whole of Bade Rai's room, but he had all Bade Rai's fancy things removed to another room. The room was now sparse. When Raghubar was not in, Bhavani slept in it. So when Raghubar entered the room that day, Bhavani was already there. Ragubar laughed and said to him :

'Bhavani Kākā, you can sleep in peace. No need to keep a watch on me. I'm not running away now.'

Bhavani had lost all his teeth. That gave him a very endearing smile. He said :

'Raghubar Bhaiya, when you were a little boy, I had to follow you around to keep you from falling. You won't remember Rahmatullah. You were perhaps not even born then. Arun Babu was very chummy with him. You always wanted to peep into the well, to watch the shimmering water, to give a shout and to marvel at the echo - you liked all that. I always tried to stop you, but you wouldn't listen, and I had to hold on tight to you. Once my foot slipped, and that day both of us had nearly had it, but we were saved. Whenever the two of you - brother and sister - had a fight, I had to separate you. Sometimes I lied to save you, sometimes to save her. As long as I live, I'll go on doing it. This was my joy then; this is my joy now.'

'But I'm not peeping into any well any more.'

He didn't say anything, but he laughed. After a while he continued :

'You know only one kind of well. My grandfather was a *Mīr Munshī*, that is, the Victory's Urdu tutor. My father died in the plague while still quite young. My mother had died only a few days after my birth. I had an elder brother - Mohan Lal. It was grandfather who brought us up. He would take me by one hand and Mohan Lal by the other, and would take us for long walks, teaching us the English language and the English numbers. People were amazed at his long walks. Mohan Lal's attention often wandered on the way and *Dādā* said : 'Mohan Lal, I'm worried about you. What are you going to do in your life? Look at Bhavani - he gets everything at the first go!' Sometimes we ran into *sahibs* on the way. The *sahib* would say : 'Birbal, you have milked the British government dry with your pension.' He would laugh and say : 'By the grace of Jesus, the Christ, I'll milk it drier.' When grandfather died, Mohan Lal got the inheritance. There was nothing in it that he had earned : everything came from *Bābā*. But he went at the inheritance no holds barred. He took to drinking. *Bābā had* left many houses. All of them were sold. When almost everything was gone, he used to force me to go to the liquor vend to get him

the liquor. He was so deep in debt that the vendor refused further credit. Tell Mohan Lal to pay up, if he wants more drink, he'd say. When my brother saw me return empty-handed, he'd go mad and beat me up as if I was the one to blame. My *bhabhi* tried to save me, but then he would lunge at her too. I didn't mind the beating I got, but I couldn't watch my *bhabhi* getting beaten up. She was so simple, so graceful that I felt guilty. When my patience gave out, I ran away from home. The big, wide world will have space for me in some corner, I thought. I reached the banks of a river, in a settlement of water-carriers. These water-carriers doubled as boatmen. They had small dinghies in which they carried the passengers across the river. I started working with them for four annas a day. The amount was quite enough to feed one person. I got a silver four-anna bit every day. In your childhood, you must have heard the *Surājīs* singing in processions :

Four anna bits of silver
Gandhi is our leader!*

But very soon it was clear that this was not the work for me. That's how I came to the haveli. But that's another story. However, a strange incident once took place when I was working at the river.

"There was this boatboy, a very skilled oarsman. Where other boatmen took an hour, he'd take only half. But he suffered from a strange mania. When his boat reached midstream, he'd jump into the river. This unsteadied the boat, and the passengers would start screaming. Women and children started crying. He enjoyed the spectacle hugely. Those who were familiar with this crazy practice of his avoided his boat like the plague, but new customers were always attracted to his boat since it was the shiniest boat around. He of course got back into the boat after a while and resumed rowing, while laughing away to glory at the passenger's discomfiture. One day he took his usual plunge. The passengers took it for a joke and waited for him to re-emerge, but he didn't. Some said a crocodile got him; others thought he was caught in an eddy. Whatever be the truth, the joke turned grim.'

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* Ek charanni chandi Ki, Jai Bolo Mahatara Gandhi Ki.

'I don't quite understand what you're trying to say,' said Raghubar.

'An old habit of yours, this,' said Bhavani. 'As a child you wouldn't go to sleep without a story. And when I told you a story, you'd start : 'What happened to him? How did it happen?' Those were stories, and I didn't mind. One picked them up somewhere and retailed them somewhere else.But this was a true story. How do I explain to you that sometimes one is so thoroughly deracinated that no return is possible. That's what happened to the boy, and that's what happened to me.' And he laughed.

Raghubar thought a little, then said : His boat had people in it; my boat has only ballast. He was a man of water, who returned to water; who knows where I shall return?'

Bhavani had now launched into *Gandhiana* : 'During the British rule, Gandhi once came to our own Company Bagh. A huge crowd had turned up to listen to him. I told myself : Here's an opportunity I musn't miss; it's not everyday you get to see Gandhi. So I went along with the neighbours, terribly scared of the consequences should Bade Rai get to know of it. And there I was in the Company Bagh. I'd never seen such crowds before. Mahātmājī was speaking : 'This country is a gigantic ship. You know what a ship is? It rides the oceans. It carries hundreds of people, from the stokers to the sahibs. It carries everything - gold, silver, diamonds, gems, stones and everything else besides. This ship of ours too was once full of these things. Then the foreigners attacked us, took away everything and forced us into slavery. We have to free this country from their clutches. This country is a ship which we must liberate from foreign control, or we'll lose even the little that we're left with. Once we win our freedom, we must work hard and replenish this ship. If we don't do this, we'll be doing all the hard labour and they'll be garnering all the fruits.'

Bhavani was already snoring. This was nothing new. As he approached the end of his story. he would always fall asleep. But Raghubar couldn't sleep for a long while. Bhavani's anecdotes reminded me of the *'doggy Bābā'*. This wanderer rarely spoke. When he did, he produced incoherent sentences. He was always driving

some ten dogs before him like horses in a coach. Some petty gamblers were always on his trail. The moment he spoke, they drew a number. He was a dangerous man, and could suddenly turn violent.

Even policemen held him in terror. Whenever he used his stick on someone. it became an occasion for the gamblers to draw a number. They had a complicated system of subtracting from hundred the number of the blows of the stick administered, then doubling the number ... and so on till the winning number was arrived at. He wore a silken robe, new shoes, and a sola hat. Exactly at one o'clock he was on the road for his daily collection. He chose his donors at random, planted himself at the door and gave a cry of 'Alakh Niranjan'. People liked to give him alms and waited for him. No one could enter his house without his permission; anyone doing so could end up with a cracked skull. His daily collection went to support himself and his team of ten dogs.

Raghubar suspected that Bhavani's stories must have some relevance, but he couldn't figure out what. The problem was sorting out their implications.

Raghubar stood at the crossroads. He had to choose the road he was going to take. One day he came purposefully to me and said : 'I want to pay a visit to Jagan Māmā. My mind is plagued with many questions about Independence. They allow me no peace. Why did he join the war of Independence? Why was independence so necessary? Are we really independent now? I'm sure he'll have the answers.'

Stupid questions! What does he mean by asking these questions now, when the country is already independent? If I told Raghubar this, he would start a tirade : Our countrymen are fools. Someone says 'Your country is a slave,' and everyone starts fighting for freedom. Then someone else comes along and says 'Your country is free,' and everyone breaks into patriotic songs and starts looking very satisfied. The problem was that I could never think up a ready answer to his questions. For example, I could have then told him: :'Look, if the country were not free, would you not see Englishmen

on the roads as we did before?' Of course, had Bade Rai been there, he would have given a sharp and befitting reply. 'You shoe your horse,' he might probably have said, 'and the frog too is ready with a leg raised. Comparing themselves with the British, these Gandhites! The British were kings; they had built an empire. And now these Gandhians are in the ring claiming to be kings!' I, however, said nothing and agreed to his request quietly. Also gave him some money. He accepted only a hundred rupees, though that was no mean sum then. I had only one fear : the way we had treated Jagan Babu was still fresh in my mind. But Raghubar could not be persuaded to change his mind.

Another thing I couldn't make out was how Raghubar found out how he was related to Jagan Babu. He, of course, knew that Jagan Babu was one of the dignitaries of the Congress and that he figured in the list of our relatives. But during Bade Rai's days no one dared mention his name in the house. This was not an explicit ban, but everyone knew Bade Rais' mind and exercised appropriate self-discipline. What we call feudalism today was essentially this ability to understand and follow unspoken and unspecified commands. People then were quite well-practised in this art. Bhavani was the only one who knew the nature of our exact relationship with Jagan Babu and he must have told Raghubar: Jagan Babu is a cousin of your mother's. During the war of Independence, he had to go underground and in that connection he had once appeared at our haveli. Bade Rai had turned him away, though actually he had not approached Bade Rai. He had come to his sister hoping for a possible shelter, but the sister was not her own mistress. He sized up the situation in no time and left quietly.

I had seen Jagan Babu at my wedding. At the time of his visit to the haveli, I was out in the zamindari. The third time was when he came to see me during my illness. He was a minister then. His attendance at my wedding was also clandestine. He had returned freshly from England and was crazy in the pursuit of independence. Very much like the princes of old who would pursue a damsel seen in a dream through forests and hills, and would lay down their lives in the quest. Kala too had probably met him once

after that day. Raghubar had of course never seen him.

It is possible that during the last days of Bade Rai, Raghubar had chanced on this knowledge, and it was this that had turned him against Bade Rai. Children who had seen the celebrations on August 15, 1947, hero-worshipped the warriors of freedom - Jawaharlal, Patel, Maulana Abul Kalaam Azad, Rajendra Babu, Rajgopalachari, and of course, Gandhi, though Gandhi wasn't around at the time of the celebrations. Raghubar must have been eight or ten then. But for kids who were born after Independence, freedom had no particular significance. That was the time when emigrant Indians were returning to India in droves. The flow now is in the opposite direction.

Raghubar also knew that, disappointed at the haveli, Jagan Babu had taken shelter in Rahmatullah's house. All the top leaders were in jail, and he was running the movement from Rahmatullah's house. This piece of information had filled his heart with intense admiration for Rahmatullah, in addition, of course, to the admiration it already had for Jagan Babu. Rahmatullah had actually achieved the status of a folk hero in the Rai family. His wife died recently. Though a Hindu, her entire manner of speech had become thoroughly Muslim. The moment someone mentioned Rahmatuallah, she would raise both her hands to the skies, invoking God's blessings, and would intone the words : 'That was an angel who had strayed into my life. He gave me joy as long as he lived. When he died, he left me overflowing with his memories and mercies. May Allah grant peace to his soul.' In the same style, she also invoked God's blessings on Bade Rai, Kishen Babu, Chhote Rai, Arun, myself, Raghubar and Girwar.

Raghubar loved to tease her. He said to her : *'Tāi Ma*, you're a Hindu, aren't you? Then why this 'Allah-Allah'?

She laughed. 'After a time, a man is neither a Hindu, nor a Muslim. He is just a human being. Allah is Bhagwan and Bhagwan Allah. There's only one religion, the religion of the saviour. There were two persons who pulled my floundering boat ashore - him and Kishen Babu, one my master and the other my benefactor.'

What to speak of Raghubar, even I could never figure out how this illiterate woman could talk such profundities. Perhaps a lifetime of struggle had given her this wisdom. Struggle is what fertilizes your experience and produces the harvest of wisdom. Yes, there was another thing. She had changed her name to *Allah Rakhi* after his death, but she had neither stopped offering water at the temple of Tulsaji, nor her fasting. Before she died, she had made it clear that her body was to be cremated, but only after the last *namāz* had been said on it. This had upset both the communities, and there was a near riot. The District Administration had to intervene and sort things out. Finally, I think she had to be buried, though neither burial ncr cremation made any sense then.

See how I have digressed? That's how it is with this taletelling business. You suddenly recall something and you go chasing it into the bushes like a rabbit, and your tale never ends. Particularly for an idler like me. After eighty, you are anyway on borrowed time, and might as well use your breath as much as you can. That's what I am doing. I had left Raghubar hanging somewhere. Yes, he had started on his pilgrimage to Jagan Babu with a hundred rupees from me. Today, he is never tired of saying that those hundred rupees made him what he is today, and that he has had nothing to do with the rest of the Rai fortune. He is a high official now. The questions that gave him so much trouble then come back to haunt him even today - but that's another story. He left the house that day, and never returned. He moved from place to place, took up jobs and then gave them up, or was thrown out; free-lanced for a time - but finally he did succeed in raising the Rai flag high once again. Whenever we give him credit for this, he laughs and says : 'I may have raised the flag high all right, but the flag is attached to no pole!' Thereby hangs another long tale.

Jagan Babu was in Nainital then. The practice of the British still countinued. Though the entire government machinery did not move to Nainital in the summers, all the ministers did. The residences were still available. The government at Delhi had of course stopped the annual shift to Shimla altogether. He wrote to

me and to Seema from Nainital. Seema waited for years for him to return; in the end, she got married. Later, Raghubar too got married and had kids. I don't know what he wrote to Seema, but to me he wrote :

> This place is terribly crowded. There are the government departments, the people chasing the departments, and not an inch of free space anywhere. There are high-ups too, but only those who have official or private accomodation available. The rest come and go. These passing tourists are the bread and butter of the local people. The tourists look at the mountains and are wonderstruck. They go into the lake and take a standing dip on its banks. Then they are gone. There are tall trees, and taller trees, like children on their parents' shoulders clapping and shouting 'I'm taller than you!' You'd once told me that we had a bungalow in Nainital. Must have been Bade Rai's handy befriender of the British. Good that we couldn't keep it. I don't know how I'd have felt had it still been there.
>
> There's a bungalow on the way to Jagan Babu's residence. I looked at it, and it struck me it could be the one we had once owned. On getting closer, I saw a slab covered with slime and weed. It said 'RAI VILLA'. There was an old man living there. I asked him and he named Bade Rai. I came away. What could I've told him about myself? Every time now I pass that bungalow, I say to myself : 'This was our *kothi*.' This proprietory sentiment defies all logic. What we own, we of course own and we call it our own, but that which we've ceased to own also evokes that sentiment : It *was* ours. That which is not our own evokes the sentiment : It *could* be ours. God! It's always 'ours', 'ours'! We didn't build it, we don't use it - and still it is ours? Don't you think the people who finally gave us our freedom, or from whom we finally snatched our freedom, may also be thinking like us : 'This country was *ours*; these people were *our*

subjects? And do the people who are in power today, do they think differently? It's laughable.

Raghubar had put up in a small hotel, probably paying five rupees a night. I was shocked to read it. The scion of the Rai family, owners of scores of bungalows and kothis, including one at Nainital itself, was staying in a sleazy, down-at-heel, five-rupee-a-night, probably damp and dingy, hotel room! Mercifully, he didn't have to stay there long; he moved out of that coop the same evening. While strolling the flats, he saw a limousine parked near the Naini temple. During the peak season months, cars were not allowed into the city centre; only ministerial and VIP cars were allowed entry; the rest had to be parked at the Tallital parking area.

Raghubar went up to the driver and inquired whose car it was.

'Home Minister's.' he replied.

'Who is the Home Minister?'

'Jagan Babu.'

'Is he here?'

'Yes. He's in the temple.'

Do these VIPs also need to pay visits to temples, Raghubar wondered. He moved aside and stood at the temple entrance. The temple is close to the lake on its banks, and you have to descend a flight of steps to reach it. As Jagan babu returned from his visit and reached the top of the steps, Raghubar greeted him. Since there wasn't much of a crowd around there then, Jagan Babu could not miss him, though normally for people like Jagan Babu to be greeted on the road was nothing remarkable. He probably would never notice the thousands of greetings offered to him. But at this point, finding Raghubar directly before him, he said :

'I can't place you ...'

'I'm Raghubar Rai,' he said and immediately cringed, as if he was trying to pass counterfeit money as good.

Perhaps that rang a bell. 'Are you from the Rai family?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Kala's son? You resemble her a lot.' And then he immediately made solicitous inquiries : 'When did you come? Where are you staying?' and before Raghubar could say anything hustled him into the car. Later, the car went and fetched his things from the hotel. Jagan Babu's wife, Kranti or Binati Bahen, too was a politician, and he introduced Raghubar to her : 'He's Kala's son. You met her once at the Railway Station decades ago. I ran into him on the Flats and brought him along.'

Binati Bahen wasn't particularly cordial. She continued talking to the people sitting with her. Jagan Babu ignored the visitors and took him inside. Once seated he expressed his grief over the death of Bade Rai, talked about Chhote Rai, whom he held in great regard, but expressed no opinion on his decision to separate from Bade Rai and start living with Arun. It seemed as if he expected it. Then he asked about me. When I had told him about the state of affairs of the Rai family, he only said : 'And what an illustrious family it once was...!'

Even he thinks the same, thought Raghubar.
It was the same letter of his which told me all this.

During his entire stay at Nainital, Raghubar's head was buzzing with questions. This matter of questions buzzing in one's head reminds me of another story that Bhavani used to tell us, though I don't know why I should be reminded of it now. But stories have a strange way of coming back to you, just as strange as is their origin in the first place. They follow no logic. Bhavani was full of stories about *hakīms*, and this is only one of them. Bhavani was very particular about giving a definite habitation and a name to his characters. This one he called *Jalinoos*. Once a Nawab, who had started getting headaches, came to him. He had already had several kinds of treatment, but to no effect. The headaches went on increasing in intensity. The *hakīm* saw him entering his clinic, but paid no attention to him, let alone stand up to receive him. He continued to examine his patients. The Nawab kept standing at first, then sat down on his own. The *hakīm* was deeply engrossed in his patients. Patients who had dropped in after the Nawab were

also getting his attention now. The Nawab's head was now bursting with pain. Finally, he couldn't control himself and spoke out.

'Hakīm Sahib,' he said, 'I've been waiting for such a long time, yet you don't even look at me. I'm the Nawab of this place.'

'I know,' said the Hakīm, 'but for me all patients are the same. And if I see someone suffering more than the others, I attend to him first.'

'My head is bursting with pain.'

'Yes, I know,' said the *Hakīm* and continued with the next patient. Every now and then, he would also throw a glance at the Nawab. The Nawab was now certain that the Hakīm was out to humiliate him. His temper rose, and he finally gave vent to it.

'Who the hell do you think you are? Don't you know who I am?' he shouted.

'Excuse me,' said the *Hakīm*, 'but I don't remember having invited you here.'

The Nawab jerked himself to a standing position and made to leave, but hardly had he taken a couple of steps when he threw up. The hakīm did not miss the opportunity of handing him another one :

'Now, now. Huzūr has made a mess of my clinic. Even illiterate villagers are more careful.'

The Nawab stepped a bit faster. There was another emission, and this time the output was characterised by pieces of meat, and these pieces could be seen to have maggots on them. God alone knows if they were actually maggots, but in Bhavani's story, they were.

The *Hakīm* now said :

'Do excuse me, sir. You're fine now. This was your cure. If it were a simple case, I'd have had to give an emetic, but you were already so full of the emetic of vanity that a little bit of inducement was enough. And inducement was all that was required to bring all this garbage out.'

Raghubar also felt that his head was full of maggotty and nonsensical vanities. And the *Hakīm* he had chosen was Jagan babu.

Whenever he saw Jagan Babu unoccupied, Raghubar rushed to his side, hoping that this might be his chance. Jagan Babu had a special chair, covered in khadi cloth, reserved for himself. Three bell-buttons were ranged by his side-one for the *chaprassi-cum-jamādār,* the other for the P.A., and so on. And a battery of telephones. The *chaprassi-cum-jamādār* was resplendent in a flowing robe with a red velvet waistcoat on top of it. The chest carried the state emblem of U.P. in golden thread, containing upended fish. Whenever Raghubar saw the emblem, he couldn't help wondering at the inappropriateness of the fish emblem to an agricultural state : the fish would have been more appropriate to a coastal state. How do these emblems get so mixed up, he wondered. There was, however, no doubt about the artistry and appeal of the golden fish on the chest. Grass and weeds would have been a poor substitute. You must grant the English an aestheic sense; the present rulers could not find anything wrong with it. Later, for *chaprassis and jamādārs,* the robe was replaced by a khadi bushshirt, trousers, and a cap. Now the notion of a uniform itself has been replaced. Everyone dresses as he pleases, though the state emblem remains intact. No change there.

Gandhiji in a meditative posture decorated a table. The photo showed him lost in prayer, with his eyes closed. It was inscribed by Gandhi himself : 'Blessing to Jagan - from Bapu.' He had signed 'Bapu' too. Possibly, in later years, he had no signature, only an image.

The room was a large one, furnished with expensive sofas, wall- to-wall carpet, recessed lights, and so on. He received his special guests in this room. The furnishings dated from the British period except for the khadi covers, which were his own contribution. The other visitors were received on the lawns of the house. Exactly at nine o'clock, he was on the lawns, ready to meet the public. The petitioners stood in a queue, petitions in hand, and related their grievances : one had lost his daughter at the time of the partition, another had lost her husband, still another had been evicted from her own house, and so on. You heard about all the possible miseries and sufferings of mankind on those lawns. Jagan

Babu gave a very patient hearing to everyone, collected the petitions, and handed them to the accompanying P.A. There was a difference here from the British days : the sahibs did not receive the petitions personally : they had to be deposited in a box.

Once, as I have mentioned earlier, when I was taken seriously ill, Jagan Babu came to the haveli to wish me speedy recovery. He was trailed by a cavalcade and a posse of armed guards. I don't know why, the spectacle of the Nawab of Chhatari, which I had seen ages ago, had floated past before my eyes then.

It did not take him more than an hour to dispose of the petitioners. The petitioners had the satisfaction that their long trip had not been wasted and that they were able to get a personal hearing from the minister. It had to produce some result. After all, the minister himself has seen hard days. Those were times when every minister was considered above suspicion. From ten o'clock to noon, he looked at the files. The P.A. put up the files and explained each case and the recommendations thereon. He then decided whose recommendation to accept and whose not to accept. The notings were in English. So were the orders. The bureaucracy was still manned by ICS officers, *Made in Britain*. Many of the central as well as the state ministers too were 'England-returned'. Naturally, their language too was different. Jagan himself had had a British education. Here was one more of a buzzer of a question for Raghubar : Is the administration at all able to communicate its messages to the common man? If it is, how?

Raghubar was now a regular companion of Jagan babu. He would go with him everywhere - it may be Almora or Ranikhet. Binati Bahen, however, maintained a formal disctance from him, though she was not averse to fun and laughter when her favourites were around her. This was food for another question in Raghubar's question-stuffed mind, and it heightened his tension. Are these important people, who have passed the trial-by-fire of the war of freedom, as conscious of the me-mine vs. he-his distinction as was New Mother, or Sona? He had once caught a glimpse of Gandhi at one of his prayer meetings, and when he saw these things he

thought of Gandhi. Was this also one of Gandhi's teachings; or is it the case that all these important people have been behaving like errant schoolboys, making a big show of studies, but absolute zeroes once the class was over? Sometimes beautiful women, well-endowed and buxom women, came to see the minister, who invariably honoured them with special priority. He also took longer over their cases, sometimes retiring to the privacy of a separate room for a more concentrated effort at the removal of their grievances. This was a cause of friction between him and Bhati Bahen, but Jagan Babu usually remained tight-lipped on such occasions, his attention fixed on a game of patience.

There were times when Jagan Babu himself would come and talk to Raghubar. He was always conscious of the fact that he was his sister's son. He often reminesced about Kala. 'We were great friends,' he would say, 'and I often beat her up.' Then he would laugh and continue : 'You see I became a Gandhian only after my return from England, actually after Gandhi called me to him and touched me with his magic wand. You know, Gandhi had this art- he could turn the biggest bully into a pet. That's to say a follower of his.' Raghubar found something of the supernatural in his talk. He wondered if all the revolutionaries Gandhi produced were not products of magic like the men in the folk stories who turned into flies, and the rats who turned into men. The magician died and, presto! the men were back to being mice again. Jagan Babu would continue : 'I see you and I think of Kala. Poor girl! Died so young. I was in jail then, but even if I were not, I doubt it if I'd have been able to see her. If you didn't have that growth on your upper lip, and were to put on a sari, you'd look exactly like Kala.' He sure had a sense of humour. My attention, however, would be on his moustache. I wonder why.

Raghubar was caught in the web of his past. Often it got tangled up with Jagan Babu's present. One's past is like a stake to which one is tethered - one can roam the field, but one must remain tied to the stake. Even a hint of a shared past immediately gives rise to familiarity. All this perplexed him no end. It was perplexity he could neither accept, put up with, nor exit from. He had let

himself loose into the world at large precisely in order to wash himself clean of these perplexities and inner contradictions. There was a tide in his soul, a tide which, though it may have given no new dimensions to his being, was clashing with some of his self-imposed prohibitions. And his entire struggle at the moment was directed towards an escape from the negativism which possessed his soul.

Jagan Babu had a fondness for books. He always had a book in his hands, even while receiving visitors. Binati Bahen did not fancy this habit of his. Though herself a political creature, she wanted her husband entirely to herself. Sometimes the assertive wife in her made her over-possesive and rather voluble. On such occasions, Raghubar was reminded of Saranga. But Jagan Babu had quite a different image outside. He was known as a patriot who had staked his life for the freedom of the country. Many of his callers were people without any motivess or self-interest. They came only to pay their respects to a well-known freedom-fighter. They would touch his feet, garland him and go back. They treated him as a great warrior who had helped in throwing the British out of the country. But, Raghubar had a feeling that these devotees of Jagan Babu were gradually transforming themselves into the private property of Jagan Babu. A strange question, which was actually not at all relevant now, often bothered him : Would Jagan Babu stay in Rahmatullah's house today? Raghubar had concluded from Jagan Babu's behaviour that he had not forgotten Bade Rai's treatment of him. Did he likewise also remember Rahmatullah's treatment? Rahmatullah, the tailor, had fearlessly embraced danger to which even a feudal overlord like Bade Rai had been afraid to expose himself. He once did make a reference to Rahmatullah : 'That tailor what was his name - yes, Rahmatullah - yes, the one who had a Hindu wife - what fearless people! So poor, yet so generous. They saw to it that I lacked no comfort.' That was all he said. Bade Rai too was in Rahmatullah's debt. Being a feudal man, he had tried to repay the debt, though Rahmatullah did not quite take it in that spirit. For Jagan Babu, if was sufficient to

have remembered him. After all it was for people like him that he had fought the war of Independence!

Then one day, Jagan Babu asked Raghubar : 'What are your plans for the future? Maybe I can be of some help. You must settle down in life now as quickly as you can. Nothing is to be gained by chasing idealism. The questions you keep asking only help to make you more and more idealistic and less and less practical. It was different in our times : idealism was then a value. Now it's foolishness. The country does not need idealism today; it needs the right chance.'

Raghubar could neither make out the question nor think of an answer. The questions that he had been struggling with took another tumble in his mind. He felt as if Bade Rai himself had reappeared before him. One day he too had told him : 'Make the best of your opportunities and complete your studies as fast as you can, son. While I'm alive there may still be hope of getting you a job. It is the same set of people in power. Anyone I approach will tell himself : 'Here's the all-powerful Rai of the British days, at my door with a begging-bowl! Let me not turn him away empty-handed." And he felt the entire set-up around him transforming itself into the familiar set-up of the yesteryears : the official residence of Jagan Babu transformed into Bade Rai's kothi; the cars into horse carriages, the drivers into Kale and Phattu; the khaki uniformed attendant of Bade Rai into the red- velvet liveried chaprassis. He was stumped. What was this transformation? Where was he in this new scenario? The most startling of all was the reincarnation of Jagan Babu as Bade Rai. One a feudal satrap, the other a revolutionary and a freedom-fighter—how could the two be so similar?

Panic seized him. His throat was parched. How should he address Jagan Babu? He began gasping for air. All those questions crawling in his mind had turned maggoty and, stuck to the lining of his brain, were devouring it bit by bit.

He got up and collected his things. Before it was evening, he was

down on the mall. The lights had gone up. These were not the bright and dazzling lights that we see today, but very dim lights which succeeded in lifting the darkness only partially. Raghubar could hardly see anything. He could make out some young couples frisking about on the road, a few frightened-looking locals stood on one side; some tourists were taking pony rides, the *sāīs*-like pony owners running behind them. By the time he reached Tallital, the high mountains, the lake which had glistened all day like silver, and the tall trees which burst out laughing like little kids at the slightest touch of the cold breeze - they had all drowned in a sea of darkness. The photo of Gandhi, which was always standing at Jagan Babu's elbow, was missing. Where could it have gone, he wondered. One more stupid question had crept into his mind.

I, Bhaskar Rai, am now completely confined to bed. I do not expect to be able to get up again. Girwar has been a failure. All he does is to look expectantly at others. I'm concerned about him. Sona's husband is dead. Sona shed all the accoutrements of a married woman and assumed a widow's garb in full seriousness. Saranga has lost some of her vision. Raghubar is a high official. He couldn't get the answers he had been looking for. Nor could he choose between the twin options of acceptance and non-acceptance. That, he now says, is the destiny of our generation. We can neither kill, nor turn into a pet, this serpent of indecision— this hungry serpent, feeding on our soul and scraping away at it with its forked tongue; it'll soon leave us soulless, and we'll keep watching helplessly. But Raghubar is still the showpiece of our line— the pride and the glory! He hates us for labelling him thus. Whenever we say it in his presence, he always adds in an injured tone : 'No, not pride, nor glory, but its shame!'

I am always filled with this fear : will the fragile glass case be able to stand this pressure, or will it crack? Will this pent-up rage explode someday like a dump of ammunition? Sometime a frenzy takes hold of him, and then he shouts like one mad : 'Gandhi is dead, but Bade Rai lives and he is immortal! I am his seed– do you know me? Come and have a good look at me! After all,

the young of a serpent cannot be all that different from a serpent! You kill one and ten more take its place.'

I, Bhaskar Rai, son of Hari Rai, listen to everything my son, Raghubar, has to say, but am at a loss for a reply. For one thing, it all goes over my head; for another, I spent a lifetime learning to keep quiet, so it's not easy to speak out now. As long as I was just a son, the question never arose; now that I am a father, I find it hard to rise above being Bhaskar Rai. The courage to play father to my son is hard to muster. I often ask myself : Can relationships change a man? Bhaskar Rai may be a father, or he may be a son, but basically he is simply Bhaskar Rai. The country became independent, but the people? They may well have travelled the road from being the loyal subjects of the King Emperor to being the founders and guardians of the Republic, but they are the same people, aren't they? The Police Inspector's cane spared no one then, it spares no one now : the only difference is that he was the servant of the Crown then, and you couldn't question his authority; now he is one of us, that's you and me, and therefore won't listen to us. Then our children went to their schools to study their language; now they go to our own schools to study their language! Mind you, I am not the only one to say this. Raghubar is with me. 'A change of attire is not a change of the person,' he says. Maybe he says this because he is a thinker. He sees things and he analyses them, but I say this because. . . because I am Bhaskar Rai. I was at the receiving end then, I am at the receiving end now. I have been walking with the bullock cart in the belief that I was guiding it; actually I was carrying the yoke then, and am driving the cart now. I can't help chuckling to myself when I think of it— driving the cart indeed! I can still sometimes feel the press of the yoke on my shoulders, as if the yoke was still there.

I must however confess that the pride in the Rai name is still not dead in me. Sometimes I feel I could throw off all restraint, rear up like Safed, and let out a loud neigh. Those people had killed Safed, these people would kill me. What difference would it make? These are no less powerful than they were. For me, it

has been downhill all the way. . . but whatever shall I do with this Bhaskar Rai who sits holding the reins tight in his hands?

As for Raghubar, he sometimes neighs, sometimes breaks loose, but then the ropes tighten, and he is pulled up short. I can't help the feeling that one day he will surely succeed in breaking free- – well, if not him, then those who come after him. Surely, there will come a day when we'll all be able to shed the feeling of being subjects, and at the same time, rise above the illusion that we are somehow the masters of the destiny of this republic[1].

The question is : When?

□

[1]The phrase *'Bharat bhagya vidhata,'* (masters of the destiny of India) is taken from the national anthem of the Indian republic, which makes use of this phrase to address the 'sovereign' people of India.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY

achkan : an item of Muslim (now Indian) dress for males; a long, buttoned-up, knee-length coat, worn with pajamas.

Ahalyā : wife of the saint Gautama in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who was seduced by Lord Indra, the king of gods, and subsequently turned into a stone (a symbol of frigidity) by the curse of her husband. She regained human form when Lord Ram favoured her with his touch.

ālāp : in vocal classical Indian music, the slow, extended notes which initiate the vocalist's performance.

Aligarhi-pajamas : loose trousers with narrow legs held at the waist with a string.

amaltāsa : an extremely beautiful yellow-flowering tree which dots the northern Indian landscape during the searing summer heat.

andarkī : a preparation from sugarcane juice and dried ginger.

ana : a four-paise coin in the older currency system in which the rupee was equal to sixteen anas or sixty-four paise.

ārtī : a worship sub-ritual which comes at the end of a worship session. In this sub-ritual, the god/goddess being worshipped is made food offerings, paid obeisance with a lighted flame to the accompaniment of special *ārtī* devotional songs.

ashvamedha : j a famed *yana* (fire-ritual) of ancient India; a horse with a victory-plate across its forehead was set at large and anyone who challenged the horse had to fight the king who had sent out the horse. The horse wandered from place to place for a year, at the end of which the fire-ritual was performed. .

athamāsī : a gold sovereign.

athannī : eight-ana coin in the old currency system; a fifty-paise coin today.

auliyā : a Muslim saint.

bahū : form used to address or describe wife of younger brother, son or any younger male relation.

bandgalā : a type of buttoned-up jacket usually worn by Indian bureaucrats.

barāt : the marriage procession or party, which the bridegroom leads to the bride's place.

barātī : a member of the *barāt.*

belpatra : leaves of a tree, the fruit of which is called *bel* (wood apple).

bhābhī : wife of elder brother.

bhaiyādūj : Brother's Day: a Hindu festival falling on the third day after the Deepavali, the Festival of Lights, and Holi, the Festival of colours.

bhajanmandal : a group of devotional singers.

bhangī : a member of the Hindu sub-caste of scavengers, night-soil carriers, etc. The term is now considered offensive and its use to address a person is illegal.

bhistī : a water-carrier and 'sprinkler,' carrying water in a goatskin bag slung across his shoulders, usually a person belonging to a Muslim sub-caste in parts of northern India.

bhog : food offerings to a god during the worship ritual of Hindu gods and goddesses.

buā : father's sister.

chamār : a Hindu sub-caste of leather and hide workers; now an offensive term except when descriptive of a sub-caste. Its use in the address form is now punishable by law.

chaprāsī : a peon ; an office attendant.

charkatā : one whose job is to cut grass as fodder for cattle, horses, etc.

chaubārā : a spacious sitting room on the first floor with doors and windows all round in the type of (Muslim style) houses common during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

chauharī : a pig-tailed staff wielded by attendants to keep

mosquitoes, flies, etc. from bothering their masters and mistresses.

chaukā ; the Hindu kitchen; cooking and/or serving area, most usually within a homestead, considered to be holy and sacred.

chhūchhak : gift of five sets of babywear, bedclothes, etc. and including a gold item, sent traditionally at the birth of a baby by the mother's mother in Hindu families.

chhipī : the Hindu sub-caste of cloth-dyers and printers (from Hindi *chhāpnā* to print).

chūrīdār : loose trousers, held at the waist with a string. with tight, gathered legs.

dādā : father's father.

darshan : the act of seeing ; used in the context of gods, goddesses, holy, virtuous, and, by extension, important people, the very act of seeing whom is supposed to bestow benefit on one, thus rendering the act a ceremonial one (cf. giving an audience).

Dashrath : in *Rāmāyaṇa*, the King of Ayodhya and the father of Lord Ram.

devar : younger brother of husband ; the relationship is a unique one in the Hindu household allowing as it does scope for a range of behaviour patterns from light-hearted flirtation to high-minded devotion.

dhotī : A length of unstitched, printed or embroidered silk or cotton (usually five to six yards) wrapped around the lower body by the Hindu men and around the whole body by the women.

dīdī : lit. 'elder sister.' In address form, also used for women senior enough to be equivalents of elder sisters, e.g. wives of husband's elder brothers; a respectful and affectionate term.

dīwānjī : the official responsible for collection of revenue, maintenance of accounts, etc. in fiefs, estates, big stores, etc.

Dīwānkhānā : the wing of the haveli where official work, e.g.

collection of revenue, hearing of cases. etc. was carried on.

Draupadī : in *Mahābhārata*, wife of the five Pāṇḍavas, sons of King Pāṇḍu. Considered to be a paragon of virtue and sacrifice, her attempted public disrobing by the Kaurav King Duryodhan and his brother Dushashan was one of the causes of the great war.

Dussherā : annual festival of the Hindus, held in October-November with gaiety and enthusiasm, celebrating the victory of Ram over Ravana, the King of Lanka, who had kidnapped Sita, Ram's wife. Ram then returned to Ayodhya and was crowned king. The Dusshera day crowns several days of Ramlila, or dramatization of episodes from the life of Ram.

gangājal : water from the river Ganga, held to possess holy and purifying properties by the Hindus.

ghee: clarified butter as normally made from cow's milk.

goldarz kurtā :a style of men's kurtā (loose, collarless shirt).

gujjar : a roving tribe of north India.

gur : jaggery.

halwāī : a maker/seller of Indian sweetmeats; a professional cook specializing in the preparation of sweetmeats and pakkā food.

Hanumān and the fish known as the best and the greatest devotee of Ram, Hanumān, a great warrior of the monkey kingdom of Sugrīva (whose help Ram sought in fighting Rāvaṇa) was instrumental in locating Sita and defeating Rāvaṇa in battle. Once the fish-queen of the ocean offered to marry him, but Hanumān claimed that he was already 'wedded' to Ram and could not marry anyone else.

Hathayogī : a follower of *Hathayoga*, a school of Yoga which lays special stress on scorching the body as a means of controlling the mind.

Hiḍimba : in *Mahābhārata*, a demoness; sister of Hidimb, a demon killed by Bhīm, one of the Pandavas. She

transformed herself into a beauty, married Bhīm and bore him a son.

Holī : the Hindu festival of colours celebrated at the beginning of the harvest season; marked by the burning of a bonfire in which an effigy of Holika, a demoness from *Mahābhārata*, is ceremonially burnt.

imartī : a type of sweetmeat popular in northern India.

ittar : extract of flowers ; perfume; essence.

jāgīrdār : the holder of a *jāgīr*, or large fief; a big zamindar.

jamādār : a superviser of junior staff.

jumā : Friday (prayers).

jeth(jī) : elder brother of husband.

jithān(jī) : Jeth's wife.

Kabaddī : a game played by two teams on a court divided into two. One member of each team, by turns, goes into the opponents' side constantly chanting, 'Kabaddi. . . Kabaddi' and simultaneously tries to touch as many members of the opposite side as possible while they try to duck him. Any members he succeeds in touching are 'dead' (i.e. out of the game). The opponents in the meantime also try to grab him and pin him down within their side till his breath gives out. If they succeed in doing so, the invader is also 'dead.' The invader tries to return unharmed to his side before he runs out of breath.

kacchā khānā : lit. unripe, uncooked, raw food. The distinction between *kacchā* and *pakkā* food is widely maintained in the Hindu food orthodoxy. *Kacchā* refers to those foods, e.g., rice, lentils, etc. which are water-boiled, or vegetables which are roasted and fried. Such foods need greater ritual precaution for cooking, distribution, sharing, etc. across caste groups. *Pakkā* foods are fat-basted or fried foods which require less precaution, e.g., *pūris, kachaurīs*, etc.

kadā : a metal bracelet worn as a religious symbol.

Kaikeyā : in *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ram's stepmother; one of the three

wives of Dashrath and Bharat's mother, she wanted her son to be the heir to the throne and was responsible for Ram's exile for fourteen years.

kākā : uncle; father's younger brother; also used as an affectionate address form for father's friends, etc.

kalākand : a sweetmeat made out of milk.

kaldār : a silver rupee coin no longer in use.

Kamsa : in Hindu mythology, a cruel tyrant; it was predicted that he would be killed by a son born to his sister Devaki and her husband Vasudev; hence he threw them into the prison when Krishna was to be born. However, Krishna was duly born, taken out of the prison on a stormy night to the house of Nanda, and replaced by the female child of Nanda and Yashoda. Eventually, the prediction came true.

kan : estimation of the produce at harvest.

kaṅgaṇā : a wedding ritual in some Hindu communities of the north at which the bride and the groom try to untie the knotted cotton bracelets on each other's wrists. The ritual is followed by an exchange of rings.

khādī : hand-woven cloth popularized as a symbol of the nationalist movement by Gandhiji.

khajūr : palm date.

khālā : mother's sister (Muslim usage).

kinnar : a tribe of professional singers and dancers mentioned in Hindu mythological works.

koel : a sweet-singing bird of the Indian spring; the Indian cuckoo.

kothā : a courtesan's place.

kothī : a big house; a bungalow.

kotwāl : the chief of the *kotwālī* (q.v.)

kotwālī : the city police HQ.

kurtā : a loose collarless shirt worn with pajama trousers.

kushtā pān: ready-to-eat betel leaf with *kushtā* (gold or silver dust) added to it.

Lakshman : in *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ram's brother; the Hindu ideal of a brother.

Lakshman Rekhā : in *Rāmāyaṇa*, a line drawn on the ground around Sita's cottage by Lakshman with his arrowhead. *Rāvaṇa*, keen to snatch Sita, had already managed to lure away Ram from the cottage with the help of Mārīch disguised as a golden deer. Shot by Ram's arrows, Mārīch cried out 'Lakshman! Help! which worried Sita so much she ordered Lakshman to rush to Ram's help. Lakshman knew Ram couldn't come to any harm, but he had to obey his *bhābhī*. Before leaving, he drew the line around the cottage. Any stranger crossing the line would be consumed by fire, but since Ravana, dressed as a mendicant, came asking for alms, and refused to accept them from across the line, Sita crossed the line and was immediately snatched by Ravana. The term is used figuratively to denote the limits, mainly moral, to one's behaviour.

Lakshmī : the Hindu goddess of wealth; when a new-born baby-girl, or a new bride in the family, is called

Lakshmi : the implication is that her arrival would bring wealth and good luck.

lutiyā : a small metal pot handy for carrying or storing water, milk, etc.

machān : a small covered platform on a tree, or any tall structure, set up temporarily for a specific purpose, e.g. hunting, seating musicians, etc.

mahari : a household maidservant whose duties are mainly scrubbing floors and cleaning utensils, dishes, etc.

mālkin : mistress of the house.

māmā : mother's brother; the nephews and nieces of the *māmā* have singular rights on the affection and generosity of the *māmā* in the Hindu social set up.

maulavī : a Muslim teacher (in the Muslim educational system).

mausā : mother's sister (Hindu usage).

missar : a brahmin cook.

mléchha : orig. a derogatory Aryan word for non-Aryans; latterly a derogatory word for non-Hindus.

mujrā : a formal dance performance by a courtesan.

muktiyajjgna: in Hindu religion, a fire ritual performed after the death of a person supposedly to gain his soul release from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Munsif : a judicial officer of a magistrate's rank.

nānā : mother's father.

naulī : a small and elongated cotton bag for holding silver and gold coins ; usually tied around the waist.

nikāh : Muslim marriage.

Pachhāh : western districts of Uttar Pradesh.

pakkā khānā : see *kacchā khānā.*

paṇḍit : a brāhmin; a priest.

panditāyan: a pandit's wife; a brahmin woman employed as a cook or a pūjā-room assistant in upper-class Hindu families.

Pandu : In *Mahābhārata,* father of the five Pandavas; himself stricken with disease and impotence, King Pandu's sons were sired by other saints and gods through his wife Kunti.

parikramā : circumambulation; going round a religious symbol e.g., a temple, a deity, fire, etc. as part of a ritual.

pātak : the polluting effect of a relative's death. This brings with it various degrees of restrictions on food, deity worship, marriage, etc. lasting for various periods depending on the degree of proximity of relationship. Cf. *sūtak.*

Patwārī : a village-level official who maintains land and revenue records.

Peshkār : an official of the lawcourt who puts up the papers to the judge.

pīhar : refers to the parents' home of a married woman.

pranām : respects; obeisance ; the word is uttered when you touch the feet of a senior relation or an elderly person.

pūjā : religious & ritual worship of gods and goddesses performed at home or in a temple.

Pūtna : in Hindu mythology, a demoness who was despatched by Kamsa (q.v.) to kill the baby Krishna. She put the baby to her breast hoping to feed him poison, but Krishna sucked the life out of her.

Qanūgo : an official of the revenue department who oversees the records of the *Patwaris* (q.v.).

raīs: the class of the traditionally wealthy.

rājıs (knife) : Roger's knife; a well-known British brand during the pre-independence days.

Rājput : the warrior class of erstwhile Rajputana, modern Rajasthan, famous for their traditions of bravery, sacrifice, fierce pride, and death-defying deeds of valiance on the part of men as well women.

Rāmlīlā : see Dussherā.

Rāṇā Pratāp : one of the legendary heroes of Rajputana, Rana Pratāp held out against the Mogul empire of Akbar, while another Rajput chief, Raja Man Singh, accepted the latter's suzerainty and was appointed the Chief Commander of his forces. At a dinner meeting where Man Singh was hoping to win over Rana Pratap to Akbar's 'liberal' and 'Indian' regime, the Rana, though welcoming the Raja, refused to eat with him. This led to a war in which the Rana was finally defeated at the glorious battle of Haldighati, but the battle also immortalized him.

sāīs : a horse steward.

samājī : a member of the Āryasamāj movement; the movement, started during the 19th c., aims at the reform of the Hindu society by reviving the pristine Vedic religion..

samdhī : the relationship that obtains between the fathers of the bride and the bridegroom; the respective mothers are called *samdhins.*

satī : in Hindu mythology, a daughter of Daksh Prajapati, one of the ten assistants of Brahmā, the Lord Creator of the universe. She lost her heart to Shiva, the Destroyer God, and married him. Daksha did not look

upon his son-in-law with favour: his ash-smeared, snake-ringed and skull-garlanded person obscured his divinity from him. Once Daksha held a yajna (a fire-ritual), but omitted to invite his daughter and son-in-law. Sati came uninvited to her father's place, but was seriously offended to see that every god except her husband had been given a place of honour at the yagna. Humiliated, she jumped into the yajna fire and committed suicide. When Shiva got to know of it, he let loose his *ganas*, or soldiers, on the assembly. They demolished the yajna, cut off the heads of many present replacing them with the heads of goats and cattle, and there was a danger that Shiva would start his dance of destruction. Chastened, Daksha then approached Shiva and sought his forgiveness. Rudra is a name for Shiva when he assumes his fearful and destructive form.

shīrnī : offering made up of sweets, etc.

somras : extract of the *som* plant, supposedly intoxicating, frequently mentioned in the Vedas.

sóth : dried ginger.

Sudarshan Chakra: a unique legendary weapon wielded by Lord Krishna in the *Mahābhārata*. Whenever Krishna's pious anger was aroused, he would recall the *chakra* (the wheel), which he wore on the forefinger of his right hand. When released, it would follow its victim to the ends of the earth and, unless recalled by Krishna, would behead him, sometimes bringing the severed head back with it.

Sūfā : a sect of Islam known for its mystical leanings.

supārī : betel nut.

surājī : a freedom fighter (from *Swarāj* = self-rule).

surmā : mascara (a mineral powder applied to the eyes to darken the eyelashes as a cosmetic).

sūtak : polluting effects of a birth in the family or among close kins; these effects are much more easily countered and

wear off much more quickly than the polluting effects of death, viz. *pātak* (q.v.).

tānpura : a one-stringed instrument used as accompaniment by vocalists of Indian classical music.

tāī(jī) : wife of father's elder brother.

tāū(jī) : father's elder brother.

tālukdār : a big zamindar.

tehsīl : administrative unit smaller than a district.

tehsīldār : the chief land revenue officer of *tehsīl;* his deputy is called *nāib-tehsīldār.*

terahvin : the thirteenth day rituals performed at the death of a Hindu. The completion of these rituals marks the end of the death-pollution (see *sūtak).* Usually, a feast is held on this occasion for both the mourners and the non-mourners if the departed person has lived a full life.

thākur : title given to members of the *kshatriya* (warrior) caste.

thālī : a large, shallow metal dish; a platter.

tīkā : a red mark applied to the forehead by the Hindus on religious/festive/martial occasions, or after the daily *pūja.*

Vāsudev katorā : a toy depicting the scene of Vasudeva's evacuation of the new- born Krishna from the prison of Kamsa (q.v.). The flooded Yamuna had receded when Vasudeva stepped into it to cross it. The toy has a mechanism which drains the water from the upper part, where Vasudeva is represented as carrying the baby Krishna in a basket on his head, to the lower part.

zenānā : (l) the women of the house (2) the part of the house to which women in the traditional, *purdah*-observing households are confined.

zenānkhānā : same as *zenānā* (2).

GIRIRAJ KISHORE 'arrived' on the Hindi literary scene with the publication of *JUGALBANDI*. The welcome this novel received could be the envy of any author. Born in Muzaffarnagar (U.P.), Kishore is now well-established in the Hindi world not only as a writer of novels and short stories, but also as a dramatist and an esayist. Kishore sees the writer not just as an artist but also as a social critic. No wonder, in addition to giving us aesthetic pleasure, his works also help us to understand the complexities and subtleties of life and function and genuine aids to living.

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